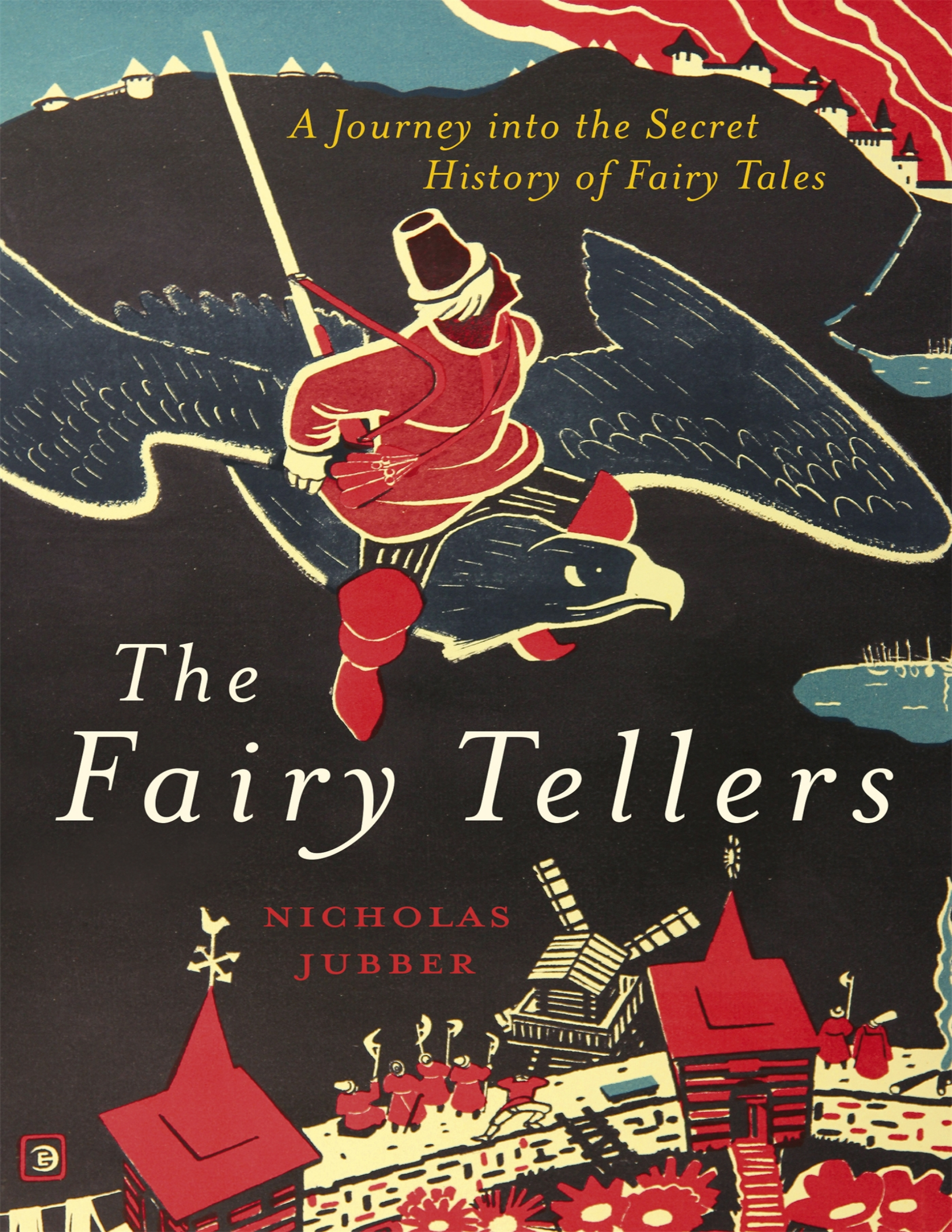

A Journey into the Secret History of Fairy Tales
The Fairy Tellers
NICHOLAS JUBBER

Nicholas Jubber has travelled in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe. He is the author of four previous books including *The Prester Quest* (winner of the Dolman Travel Book Award) and *Epic Continent* (shortlisted for the Stanford-Dolman Travel Book Award). He has written for numerous publications, including the *Guardian*, Observer, *Globe and Mail*, *Irish Times* and *BBC History.*

Also by Nicholas Jubber

The Prester Quest

Drinking Arak Off an Ayatollah's Beard

The Timbuktu School for Nomads

Epic Continent

The Fairy-Tellers

A Journey into the Secret History of Fairy Tales

Nicholas Jubber

JOHN MURRAY

www.johnmurraypress.co.uk

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by John Murray (Publishers)
First published in the United States of America in 2022 by Nicholas Brealey Publishing
Imprints of John Murray Press
An Hachette UK company

Copyright © Nicholas Jubber 2022

The right of Nicholas Jubber to be identified as the Author of the Work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Cover image: Russian Folk Tale, 1961, Evgenia Endrikson (1907–94)/Gamborg Collection/Bridgeman Images

Internal artwork by Rosie Collins

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library

eBook ISBN 978-1-529-38925-8

John Murray (Publishers)
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.johnmurraypress.co.uk

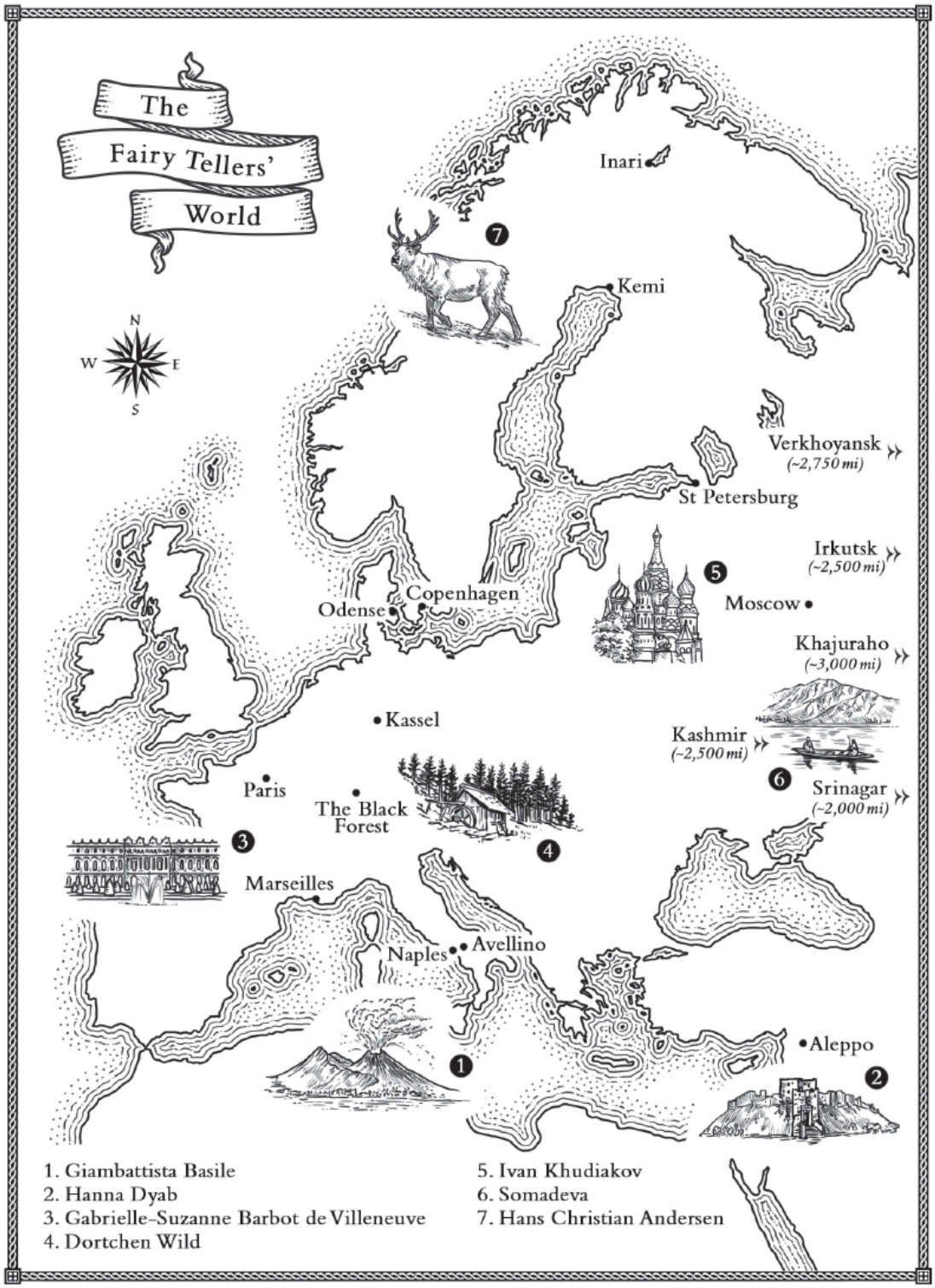
For Anne-Marie and Christopher

Contents

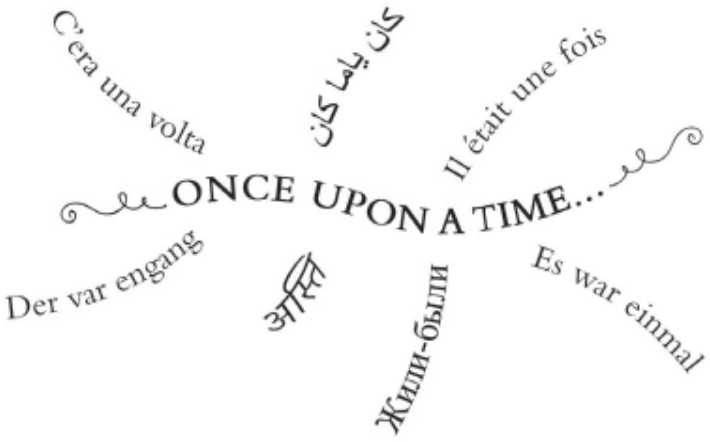
Map

Prologue
PART ONE: A Snail at the Foot of a Mountain
PART TWO: An Accidental Storyteller
PART THREE: Of Shrews and Salons
PART FOUR: The Girl from the Golden Sun
PART FIVE: The Rise and Fall of Ivan the Fool
PART SIX: A Valley Haunted by Demons
PART SEVEN: A Heart Too Warm for Ice
Epilogue

Acknowledgements
Sources and Further Reading
Bibliography
Notes


The Fairy Tellers' World
N
W
E
S
Inari
Kemi
Verkhoyansk
(~2,750 mi)
St Petersburg
Irkutsk
(~2,500 mi)
Moscow
Khajuraho
(~3,000 mi)
Kashmir
(~2,500 mi)
Srinagar
(~2,000 mi)
Copenhagen
Odense
Kassel
Paris
The Black Forest
Marseilles
Naples
Avellino
Aleppo
1. Giambattista Basile
2. Hanna Dyab
3. Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve
4. Dortchen Wild
5. Ivan Khudiakov
6. Somadeva
7. Hans Christian Andersen

Prologue



When I was seven years old I discovered the excitement of nightlife.

All it needed was a book and a micro-torch. An uncle had given me the torch and the book was a present from my grandma: three and a half pounds of storytelling, bound in a barky brown cover. It was called *A Treasury of Children's Literature*, and it included a few extracts from novels. But the stories I remember are the fairy tales.

I close my eyes, my heart beats that little bit faster, the blood thrilling through my veins like it did when I was younger, crouching under the cavern roof of my duvet long after lights out. The torch turned the pages to palimpsests of silver, magic portals to other worlds. I followed Hansel and Gretel into the forest, rode with the Arabian prince on the ebony horse, clung to the furry neck of Gerda's reindeer, imagining the sheets beneath me as the snowy pastures of Lapland.

I was one of those children in thrall to fairyland, and I stayed there longer than I probably should have done. The stories strapped me in with their comforting preambles, then held me bound as they cantered off at breakneck speed. I enjoyed the swerves in the storylines, the finger-snap transformations, the grisly moments leaping out when you didn't expect them (and, just as excitingly, when you absolutely did), the verses and sayings like 'Open Sesame' or the many different names for Rumpelstiltskin, which I repeated at dinner time to rolled eyes from family members and expressions of kindly confusion from visitors.

Events in fairy tales tend toward multiples of three, and that's been the case for me. As I grew older, I turned my back on the *Treasury.* I shunned the red-spined Ladybird books. The tapes from *Story Teller* magazine, which used to mesmerise me on car rides down the M3 – away they went, lost under a heap of abandoned teddy bears, the broken pieces of a Penguin Slide and the Big Yellow Teapot. But the instinct for adventure had taken root. Grow up in suburbia, and either you tend to stick it out or you spend your life looking for ways to flee those privet hedges and cul-de-sacs and wounded postmen nursing their ankles after run-ins with the local terriers. With siblings and friends, I tumbled into the woods at the corner of the road, running below window height in case the old lady at the corner (or 'witch', in our fevered imaginations) tried to turn us into toffee, discovering monster trails in fox pugs and alien surveillance in the prickly fruit of chestnut trees. As I grew older, I continued to feed on magical stories, but packaged for the ages I'd reached: fantasy fiction with wizards and dragons, time-travelling sci-fi, horror novels teeming with monsters . . . But a strange thing happened on the threshold of adulthood: I found myself sliding back into the enchantments of earlier days.

While savvier undergrads were wowing our peers with scripts about the impending millennium or the dangers of digital media, I was scribbling stories about tea parties for talking animals or goblin kingdoms reached by secret passageways in medieval castles. It may not have won me a lot of street cred in the student bars, and yes, it might have pushed me behind the sturdier masculine specimens on the dating scene (although I did get a few questions about what I'd been smoking, and whether there was any left), but a few of my fellow students were on board.

One summer term, we took over the college lawn, built a ten-foot-high tower with scaffolding wrapped in painted fabric, enlisted an orchestra and a cast of thirty-two. Our characters included an American private dick hired to find out who pushed Humpty Dumpty off the wall (the latter encased in an egg made out of papier mâché), Rumpelstiltskin as a state informer, and a doddery king who's failed to notice that his daughter's half goblin. The weather was kind and so were our audiences. On the final performance, they greeted us with a tremendous applause (or, to put it another way: the college bar was really cheap), some of them standing on the bleachers, clapping us into the night.

With parenthood, fairy tales spilled back into my life for the third time. There's only so many Zogs and Lonely Donkeys, Not-so-Scary Snorklums and multiple Paw Patrols you can read aloud before you're hankering for the classics. My children's responses fascinated me. My animal-loving youngest identified with the wolf more than with Little Red Riding Hood, and there was a vulpine relish in his delivery of the line 'All the better to eat you with!' My *Star Wars*-eager eldest suggested Hansel and Gretel missed a trick by failing to go into the woods armed with lightsabers.

In the games that followed I found myself huffing and puffing over the bunk bed, which had turned into the brick house of the Three Little Pigs, crouching troll-like underneath it, snarling at the 'trip-trapping' of the Billy Goats Gruff, and fee-fi-fo-fumming down the stairs to recover my golden harp from Jack. Occasionally, I was pinned by the kind of crafty questions at which children are so preternaturally skilled. 'Why are they called fairy tales,' I was asked one afternoon, a pair of button-shaped eyes gleaming over a stack of books, 'when fairies don't even have tails?' Another time, a nose wrinkled over the kitchen table as the words floated over a tub of peanut butter: 'Why are there so many witches in fairy tales, but never any wizards?'

Gradually, other imaginative vistas lured the children away, and the traditional stories were left behind for dinosaurs and spaceships. But my old fascination had been re-lit, and I wasn't ready to give them up all over again. It was as if I'd been going back to the same party, all through my life, but I'd never found out who had cooked all the delicious food, who'd made the decorations, who'd chosen the song list. It was time to find out who they were, and give them thanks.

The Trail Begins

Fairy tales stretch back at least five thousand years – so scientists have declared. According to phylogenetic research, a biological process investigating the roots of language,[FN1] the origins of stories like 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'Jack and the Beanstalk' can be traced back to the Bronze Age. It's a thrilling thought – linking us to listeners and storytellers across the millennia. But it overlooks something crucial: the stuff that brings the tales to life. It treats the tales as if they came fully

formed, prioritising structural roots over the atmosphere and imagery embedded by individual storytellers.

However vague their opening words may be, fairy tales are rarely located in the timeless zone of everywhere and everywhen. ‘Once upon a time’ (or in French and German ‘There was once’; ‘There was, there wasn’t’ in Arabic; ‘There is’ in Sanskrit) is the deceptively noncommittal doorway to a world that’s often surprisingly particular. Spinning-wheels and castles with jigsaw parapets, dark forests haunted by wolves and bears, heroes on horseback and princesses in veiled hennins leaning out of pointed towers: the classic Western fairy tale is time-locked inside a bubble of medieval Europe. Which is why, when postmodernists construct their fairy tale pastiches – from Stephen Sondheim’s *Into the Woods* to *Shrek* to TV series like *Once Upon a Time* and *Disenchanted* – they paint their scenes from the same palette. But, as we’ll see, there are fairy tales all over the world, and they root themselves in their own settings.

What they don’t necessarily call themselves is ‘fairy tales’. We use the term in English and French (*contes de fées* – coined in the late seventeenth century by a brilliant teller of tales called the Baroness d’Aulnoy, and the circle that formed around her), but other languages define the genre differently. The Danes, who produced the most famous individual fairy teller in Hans Christian Andersen, go with *eventyr*, which is cognate with the English word ‘adventure’. Germans have *Märchen*, which means ‘little tale’, allowing for the breadth of material in the best-selling of all fairy tale collections, the *Children’s and Household Tales* of the Brothers Grimm. Amongst the terms used in Arabic is *hikayah al-khayaliyeh*, or ‘tales of imagination’, emphasising their magical expectations.

But pinning down the taxonomy is like the endless chores handed to the heroines in so many of our tales, and if the birds and mice aren’t going to help, we could be stuck trying to work it all out until we’re living in giant zeppelins over an uninhabitable earth using the last copy of the Grimms’ *Kinder und Hausmärchen* to keep ourselves warm. The more important question – at least, the question I’m posing in this book – is who.

Who told them? Who wrote them? Who collected the stories that nourish our childhood imaginations? And what drove them to refine the tales in the particular ways they did?

It’s a tribute to their success that we don’t automatically ask this question. The chances are, if you’ve picked up this book, that you know

the tale of ‘Beauty and the Beast’. But can you name its author? I certainly couldn’t before I started looking into it. But, however ancient its roots, the story as we know it today wasn’t summoned in shamanic reverie by some primordial folk-teller. It was written by a prolific author, who lived in Paris and printed the story in 1740. ‘Aladdin’ is the most famous tale of *The Thousand and One Nights*, but who can name the storyteller who recited it in 1709? Most of us know about the Brothers Grimm, but who gave them the tale ‘Hansel and Gretel’, which first appeared in print in 1812? Even when I started asking these questions, it didn’t occur to me that the answers could be so specific.

The enduring anonymity around fairy tales is understandable. We can find elements of their plots in classical mythology – and if their histories stretch back through millennia, then it stands to reason that we wouldn’t know who gave us the earliest versions. It took a rare genius like Hans Christian Andersen to mint fresh fairy tales (although, as we’ll discover, many of his tales were influenced by oral stories and adapted from earlier versions). But this anonymity not only conceals the people who did so much to shape the tales; it also spreads a mist of obscurity over the historical periods in which the stories were standardised. Step through the fog, wait for it to clear, and we start to discover why they became fixed in the forms we know today. Why Aladdin’s genie lives in a lamp, and must be found in a cave. Why the Beast’s palace is surrounded by statues and orange trees. Why the Little Mermaid has to lose her voice. The bodies of the stories may be ancient – structures that scholars have identified across centuries and cultures – but, important as structure is for any storyteller’s toolkit, it isn’t what sparks our childhood imaginations. A child reading ‘Hansel and Gretel’ is more likely to remember the gingerbread house or the moment when Gretel pushes the witch into the oven, rather than the tale’s elegant multi-part structure.[FN2] After all, isn’t structure what the grown-ups are for?

Fairy tales had been tugging at my attention – and now it was time to do something about them. I wanted to dig into the tellers’ lives and find out all about them. To read their correspondence, the other tales they left behind, what their friends and relatives (and in some cases their enemies) wrote about them. The deeper I looked, the more I realised there was to find: letters, diaries, even tales that had never been published, nor translated into English. But I also realised the archives weren’t enough. In

order to understand the tellers, I needed to track them down to the places where they lived and loved and moulded their tales.

Researching their lives, I found myself wandering around the most famous palace in France, interviewing ballet dancers in Denmark and dining with members of an Italian academy founded in the seventeenth century. I was camping in the Black Forest in springtime, smelling the rising garlic, watching witches dancing around a village square; and in the winter I was riding on the back of a reindeer herder's snowmobile, shimmying against cannonballs of snow sprung from the hoary branches of spruces and pines.

But travel, during this period, became a dream increasingly hard to envisage; and the image of the fairy tale heroine, locked in solitude in a tower, grew into an everyday reality. I wanted to explore fairy tales beyond the geographical parameters in which we've tended to corral them in the West, to include Arabic and Indian stories as well as the remarkable but often neglected *skazki* of Russia. So I found myself riffling through old travel journals, stepping among some of the fairy tellers through my own nearly forgotten trails. I wanted to balance an exploration of the stories I had grown up with – the big hitters like 'Hansel and Gretel', 'The Snow Queen' and 'Beauty and the Beast' – with an exploration of the wider world across which fairy tales have travelled. Which is why this book includes stories about treasure caves in the desert, mythical birds landing on banyan trees and a hero carried across the sea in the skin of a dead elephant. The history of the fairy tale is like the intestines of a cow – roll it all the way and it stretches so much further than we could ever have expected. *Märchen* or 'little stories' they might be (to use the German term), but the story of the fairy tale is as big as it gets.

In choosing how to tell this story, I felt like I was standing in a forest with so many trees, of so many varieties, that it was difficult to pick a manageable path. An exhaustive encyclopaedic approach would have prevented the kind of close-up personal attention I wanted to give the tellers, so I settled on a core selection. Individually, these figures made crucial contributions to fairy telling, inventing or significantly shaping most of the Western fairy tale canon, including 'Cinderella', 'Rapunzel', 'Sleeping Beauty', 'Rumpelstiltskin' and 'The Little Mermaid'. They also gave us hundreds of other tales, many of which are stranger, and more interesting, than the ones that clog up the traditional anthologies. Their

collective life stories trace the development of the fairy tale from oral community tales to the mass production lines of the modern children's literature industry. This is why *The Fairy Tellers* follows a roughly chronological path, from the first literary collection of fairy tales in Europe, in the early seventeenth century, to the mid nineteenth century, although some digressions will slide back in time (and one will lead us all the way back to the Middle Ages). This is only one version of the fairy tale story, for there are many paths through this forest.

Despite the fame of their stories, most of these tellers are neglected figures, shrouded by centuries of official literary history. Some have only become approachable because of new sources that have surfaced in the last few years. Many have been obscured, until now, because so many of the sources remain untranslated, and are presented here in English for the first time.[FN3] Ranging across backgrounds as well as birthplaces, they include a Neapolitan soldier of fortune, a Syrian youth running away from a career in the souk, an impoverished French aristocrat, a German apothecary's daughter, a Russian dissident who found himself embroiled in a plot to kill the tsar, a Kashmiri courtier charged with cheering up his queen, and a lonely Dane with a habit of singing to plants. No selection can satisfy everybody, but I hope my choices have succeeded in reflecting the international dimensions of the fairy tale story while keeping a balance between beloved, iconic tales and lesser-known gems.

All of the storytellers in this book had enormous challenges to face, from poverty to political turmoil, from psychological afflictions to the horrors of war. Some succeeded in overcoming these challenges, but not all of them did. As we'll discover, 'happy ever after' is a cliché often spurned by the tales themselves. Many of our most beloved stories end sadly, and so, unfortunately, did many of our fairy tellers. But all of them lived, and most of them loved; several of them travelled, experiencing many different shades of the world, and a couple of them succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

By focusing on these tellers, by travelling among them, by reading what they told us about their lives, we remind ourselves that stories are cooked in specific places. However universal the ingredients, the recipe carries a local flavour. The reason these stories still speak to us is because they were set down by people who knew poverty and wealth, love and hate, fear and excitement, just as we do today; people who shared in the humus of

human life. By unmasking these tellers, we strip away some of the costuming that's disguised their stories. Like Aladdin's lamp, many of them are very different when you've rubbed away several centuries' worth of dust.

These are precious stories, beautiful stories, carved out of terrible suffering in some cases, and in others moulded from moments of ecstatic joy. To peel back the layers and expose what lies beneath them: what would that do? On the edge of my trail, I felt as if I was about to trespass on hallowed ground. As if I was Bluebeard's wife when she turns the key in the door she's been told must never be opened, and sets her eyes on the chopped-up limbs of her murdering husband's previous wives. As if I was Psyche, goaded by her sisters to look on her night-time lover in Western literature's oldest written fairy tale, 'Cupid and Psyche' (which was set down all the way back in the second century ad, by a writer from what is now Algeria), warned that her bed-mate is a monster, 'an enormous snake with many twisting coils'. But when she sparks an oil lamp, she finds herself gazing on the most beautiful man she's ever seen.

Terror or beauty, or something in between? One of the less palatable lessons of traditional fairy tales is that curiosity (especially in young women) is often answered with punishment rather than reward. But if you've got the itch, you're going to find it awfully hard to stop scratching. The path will pull you in, like the bright lights pull in the Little Mermaid, like the cave door lures Ali Baba, like the flaming wings of the Firebird propel the Russian hero, Prince Ivan – and there isn't very much anybody can do to stop it . . .

PART ONE

A Snail at the Foot of a Mountain

There is nothing in the world more delicious, my illustrious women, than to hear about the doings of others . . . since when you lend an ear to tasty items, cares evaporate, irksome thoughts are dispelled, and life is prolonged.

Prince Tadeo, *The Tale of Tales* (1634–6)

The Tale of the Laughing Princess

Princess Zoza is beautiful but melancholy. It doesn't matter what her father puts before her – jugglers or a jumping monkey, an ass that drinks from a glass – nothing can so much as crack a smile on her face.

Until . . .

One day, a mischievous court page heckles an old woman and breaks her pitcher with a stone. In retaliation, she lifts her skirt and flashes a 'woodsy scene', prompting the watching Zoza to erupt in the very first laugh of her life. Indignant, the old woman hurls a terrible curse upon her: may she never find a husband except for 'the prince of Round Field', the sleeping Tadeo, who lies in a faraway tomb under a fairy's enchantment, which can only be lifted by filling a pitcher with tears.

So Zoza sets out to cancel both her own curse and Tadeo's. In the course of her journey, she meets three fairies, who give her a magic walnut, a chestnut and a hazelnut. Her natural melancholy is a great asset – on reaching the prince's tomb, she pours two days' worth of tears into the pitcher. But so exhausted is she that she falls asleep when only a few more drops are needed to fill the vessel. A passing slave-girl, seeing how little needs to be done, adds her own tears, and the awakened prince takes her as his wife.

What a desolation for Zoza! Discovering her feat has been completed by another, she trudges to the city. Cracking open the magic walnut, chestnut and hazelnut, she produces a singing manikin, a hen with golden chicks and a gold-spinning doll, which she imbues with a special property: 'to instil in the slave's heart the desire to hear tales'. Powerless against this enchantment, the pregnant slave-queen orders Prince Tadeo to surround her with story-spinners. Quickly they come, from all over the city: 'big-nosed Tolla', 'hunchback Popa', 'snout-faced Ciulla', and many others.

Ten storytellers are chosen to attend the slave-queen in the palace garden. And so begin five days of magical adventures, culminating in a tale about a devious slave-girl, which cuts a little close to the bone. Invited to narrate her own tale, Zoza reveals the slave-queen's deception and

Tadeo has his false wife – along with his unborn baby – buried alive. Not that he's planning on remaining single for long. He takes Zoza as his new queen and sends word to her parents to ride quickly, for the wedding party is about to begin . . .

Chapter 1

Giambattista Basile

Back, back, back . . . seek out the roots of the fairy tale and we're hacking one thorny hedge after another, all the way back to the Stone Age. We could climb out in North Africa in the second century ad, which is where the Latin-writing high priest and philosopher Lucius Apuleius scribbled down 'Cupid and Psyche', the oldest-known literary Western fairy tale, about a beautiful princess in an enchanted palace who scalds her mysterious lover with a drop of oil and sets out on a troubled journey to find him again, performing arduous chores to appease her vindictive mother-in-law, helped by an entire district's population of ants, a kindly talking reed and an eagle.

Or we could leap out in medieval India, where we find hundreds of tales of magical doings, lovers separated by twists of fate, people and gods transformed into animals, in the wonderfully titled *The Ocean of the Streams of Story* (written *circa* 1070 ad), a collection to which we'll be turning our attention before this trail is done.

Or how about a trip to sixteenth-century Venice? There we'd encounter Giovanni Francesco Straparola, whose *Facetious Nights* (published 1551–5) contained around fifteen fairy tales (in a collection of seventy-five), including the earliest written version of 'Puss in Boots' as well as forerunners to 'The Golden Goose' and 'Donkey-Skin'.

But this trail starts with a collection penned in southern Italy in the seventeenth century, notable for its direct connection to many of our most popular tales. It was entitled *Lo cunto de li cunti – The Tale of Tales* – and its author went by the pen name 'Gian Alesio Abbattutis' – the surname translating as 'the dejected one'.

Which turned out to be a misdirection. Giambattista Basile was known, to quote a contemporary, for 'his perpetual cheerfulness of spirit, for which he was deemed the life of conversations'. Like Princess Zoza, the

melancholy heroine whose tale frames his story collection, he lit up the people around him; and like his heroine, he roamed far and wide in search of his dream. But he returned to his home shores around Naples and lived out his life at the Italian courts. Giambattista was a prolific author, although only a moderately successful one. Nothing published in his lifetime would be remembered. His legacy rests, instead, on the posthumous collection of tales, published shortly after his death, in 1634–6.

Venture into this four-hundred-year-old cavern of narrative and you'll meet storytelling at its most sumptuous and strange: where a childless queen is impregnated by the cooked heart of a sea dragon, a man prevails on a kingdom of mice to help him reclaim his lost fortune (as long as he pays them enough cheese) and a cockroach burrows inside the rectum of its master's lordly rival, turning itself into a suppository to make him shit all over his bride. But you will also encounter some of our most familiar childhood tales.

The young woman forced to labour for her horrible stepsisters, whisked by magic to the ball, who simply can't hold on to her shoe – for European readers, Giambattista got there first. The princess in the tower, whose hair becomes a ladder so her handsome lover can climb up to meet her – that's one of Giambattista's. He provided one of the earliest known versions of the comatose princess in the forgotten castle; and of the brother and sister, abandoned in the woods by their woodcutter father, who can't make their way home because their trail's been eaten.

Although fairy tales can be found in the aforementioned collections, Giambattista's was the first to be devoted entirely to fairy tales, 'the sort that old women usually entertain the little ones with', as he defines them near the beginning of his book. It's in *The Tale of Tales* that we find recognisable versions of our classic fairy tales for the first time; where the stories are driven not by the machinations of gods but by the antics of ogres and witches; where fingers are pricked on spinning-wheels and princesses are locked in towers; stepmothers are routinely cast as villains and forests as amphitheatres for magical goings-on. It is from Giambattista's collection, in some cases very specifically, that we can trace a path to the beloved tales we know today.

Asylum in Crete

So who was the man who put these tales together? He was born around 1575, a contemporary of Shakespeare and Cervantes: a figure of the Renaissance, living through the Counter-Reformation and Age of Discovery when Europe wrestled with new ideas in science and religion, its cities enriched by precious goods and people pulled out of faraway lands. All of these elements would find their way into his tales.

Growing up in the pleasant resort of Posillipo, on the fringe of the court of Naples, Giambattista passed a comfortable youth, but an unfruitful one. Without a noble patron, a life of letters was unthinkable. So he travelled across Italy and charmed his way into the graces of a Venetian nobleman called Andrea Cornaro.

The Venetian Republic had interests in Crete, and Giambattista made his way to the embattled island as part of Cornaro's entourage. Squint hard and we can visualise him: manning the Lazaretto battery, setting out in pursuit of corsairs, in a galleon loaded with powder and the contraband arquebuses captured from unlicensed ships, even taking part in a battle against the galleys of the Ottoman Turks. But soldiering, as Giambattista wrote in his *Tales*, is a hazardous enterprise: you're liable to be 'completely destroyed, or crippled' with nothing to show but 'the subsidy of a pair of crutches, or a treatment for scabies, or – and it's the lesser evil – a pension plan in the hospital'.

A surviving portrait shows the gentle expression of a man more likely to pour witticisms in your ear than bellow across the plaza. Smooth waves of hair flow above dark gleaming eyes, which peer at the viewer with humorous scepticism. His curling whisk collar and his beaded doublet hold him to the age, along with the sword pommel peeking out from a curled hand; but something in that wry expression speaks across the centuries, inviting us to share the joke with him.

Described by a contemporary as 'the true epitome of an exquisitely refined gentleman', Giambattista was better suited to swapping tales in noblemen's salons than holding off mortar-pieces from hastily erected siege towers. In Crete he found himself in Cornaro's Academia degli Stravaganti, 'Academy of the Eccentrics'. The heyday of the literary gentlemen's club had begun: members sat around delicately carved tables, fooling around with satires or dazzling each other with the latest scientific

formulae. Every member had a code name: Giambattista's was Il Pigro ('The Lazy One'). Whether or not this was a comment on his disinclination for fighting, we have firmer proof that he wasn't cut out for a soldier's life: within a year he'd resigned his commission and decided to return to Naples. The 'ungrateful shores' he called them. They may have spurned him in his youth, but now he was older and better connected, a talented scribbler with a knack for making friends. All he needed was a bit of fairy dust. Or, to use its more workaday name: luck.

Megalopolis

One of the most exhilarating views in Naples is from the belvedere outside Saint Martin's Charterhouse on the Vomero Hill. Wandering around the old city, trying not to get squashed by the motorcycles or flattened against walls of crumbling plaster, you pop out of the labyrinth like a cork out of a bottle of Prosecco, flying up wide stone steps crackling with broken glass, and lean into the classic Neapolitan panorama.

Above, the hexagonal ramparts of Saint Elmo's Castle claw the crest of the Vomero, forming a giant star of volcanic tufa. Behind, the charterhouse facade is dazzling white, a sun-kissed screen for the mosaic-work, handcrafted nativity scenes and Baroque paintings inside. If it weren't for Mount Vesuvius, bristling across the valley, this formidable assembly would preen triumphant over the Bay of Naples. As it is, wedged between the volcano and the smoking craters of the Phlegraean Fields, Naples exists in a state of dramatic tension: commanding the sea but cowering under the deadliest lava spewer on mainland Europe.

Giambattista would have climbed these steps if he joined his literary friends on their regular visits to the prisoner Tommaso Campanella, who was chained in the castle dungeon throughout the first quarter of the seventeenth century. Languishing in his dank confinement, Campanella was composing a groundbreaking utopian philosophy, *The City of the Sun*, in which he challenged prevailing wisdom with a radical reimagining of social structures – a society where 'all things are common' and 'both sexes are instructed in all the arts together'.

Although Campanella was derided by the authorities and most of his contemporaries, he was admired by many, including the aristocrat

Giovanni Battista Manso, Marquis of Villa, and founder of a literary academy (the Academy of Idlers) in which Giambattista became an early member. Campanella's radical philosophy reflected the questing anxieties of the age. While Giambattista was re-establishing himself in Naples, another acquaintance of the Marquis of Villa was making his first telescopic observations in Padua. Galileo Galilei's study of the phases of Venus, proving that the planets orbit the Sun, would underpin a radical shift in European science and philosophy, changing not only the way the universe was seen but also our place within it. The Inquisition would condemn the scientist a year before *The Tale of Tales* was published.

Wrestling cosmology free of theology was fractious and at times violent, and it engaged the minds of many of Giambattista's acquaintances, like the natural philosopher Giambattista della Porta (who, amongst many achievements, perfected the camera obscura, developed the power of steam and printed a crucial proof – smashing a widespread belief of the time – that magnets couldn't be disempowered by garlic). Despite the menace of papal inquisitions, scientists were illuminating the universe. If the cosmos was vaster than had previously been appreciated, and humanity's place less central, what other certainties were starting to wobble? A feeling of displacement rippled through intellectual society. We find it expressed not only in the work of Giambattista's scientific contemporaries but also in that of his fellow artists.

Among the painters he knew was Massimo Stanzione, whose work he praised in a couple of poems – an ode and a madrigal. To peer at Stanzione's *Preparations for the Last Supper*, hanging darkly behind the altar in the Saint Martin Charterhouse, with its bare-chested, dirt-stained servants scrubbing metal dishes and carrying wine pitchers under Baroque archways and pillars, is to witness the local overlapping with the mythical, which is an animating principle in Giambattista's tales as well. They were both breathing new life into ancient forms and narratives, filling them with people from the streets around them.

From the belvedere of Saint Martin's, terracotta roofs ripple down through the Spanish Quarter, sliding around the occasional stone steeple and lead dome. The quarter took its name in the sixteenth century, when troops from the occupying Spanish power were billeted here. They had ruled since the mid fifteenth century and would remain in power until

1707, keeping Naples separate from the rest of the Italian peninsula, but connecting it to their wider empire, stretching right across the Atlantic.

With steel breastplates battened over their doublets, Spanish officers distributed their sentinels all over the Old Town, under the blood-red saltire of the Spanish flag. Their presence, as with so many military occupations, had a complicated impact on society. Life at court forced anybody with ambitions to mix with them, and Giambattista was even commissioned by the viceroy to write masquerades and fill bureaucratic posts. But he also shared the Neapolitan distaste for their overseers. And one of the advantages of writing fantasy is that it's easy to cover your tracks.

In the frame tale of Giambattista's collection, Princess Zoza's rightful husband is stolen from under her sleeping eyes. For some readers, this is a parable for occupation, slyly chiding 'sleepy Naples' for letting go of its rights. But allusive narrative techniques were never going to satisfy a writer as bombastic as Giambattista. Throughout the book he takes aim at the Spanish, knocking them for their 'sallow colour', propensity for boasting and stealing gentlemen's cloaks.

Was he flirting with danger? It may explain why the book remained unpublished in his lifetime. But he was emboldened by his language, for unlike many of his other works, *The Tale of Tales* was written in Neapolitan,[FN1] in which few Spaniards were proficient.

Giambattista's closest friend, the writer Giulio Cortese, was a fellow pioneer of works in Neapolitan. In his *Voyage to Parnassus* (1621), Cortese declared: 'I write as I speak . . . and the words of Naples are cast . . . not from gold, but from sugar and honey.' Giambattista had the same pride in their native tongue. '*Ah zaccaro,*' declares the furious old woman, heckling the rude page-boy in the frame tale of *The Tale of Tales*, '*frasca, merduso, piscialietto, sautariello de zimmaro, pettola a culo . . .*' ('Ah, you worthless thing, you dope, shit-head, bed-pisser, leaping goat, diaper ass . . .'). With tirades like this, Giambattista was celebrating the spiciness of the local tongue. And when a rich Neapolitan character rids himself of a parasite, declaring, 'you act like an occupying soldier who wants to scare us out of our possessions', he's sticking it to the Spaniards. As we'll see, Giambattista wasn't the only fairy teller for whom the writing of magical tales had a sharp political edge.

And yet it's the complicated nature of political occupation that it can be hard to push the invader aside. It was the Spanish presence, after all, that made Naples the grand city it had become. Its street plan dated back to the sixth century bc, the rectilinear grid of market streets and squares laid out under an earlier foreign occupier – the Greek masters who named it Neapolis ('New City') and turned it into their Tyrrhenian getaway. But it was the Spanish, in the sixteenth century, who transformed the city's layout to the one we know today, fortifying the hills, building marina embankments around the half-moon harbour, and laying down the central thoroughfare of Via Toledo – named after the sixteenth-century viceroy, Pedro de Toledo. In the process, they turned Naples into the busiest port in the Mediterranean.

'I see in every street,' wrote the seventeenth-century court secretary, Giulio Capaccio, 'every alley, at every corner so many people who jostle me and tread on me, and I have difficulty in getting away from them.' With buildings rising up to six storeys and a population of more than three hundred thousand (three times as large as Rome), Naples was the megalopolis of southern Europe, praised for its assets as much as it was vilified for its squalor, 'a paradise peepled by devils', in the words of the seventeenth-century English writer James Howell. 'There is nobody who does not desire to see it,' Capaccio insisted, 'and who does not desire to die here.' Or, as the tourist brochures put it: 'see Naples and die'.

It was in this period that Naples offered many of her greatest gifts to the world: developments in the camera obscura and the telescope;[FN2] ideas about cosmic pluralism and the infinity of the universe; the foregrounding of communism (in Campanella's *City of the Sun*); the establishment of scientific societies; artistic masterpieces by Caravaggio, the gore-obsessed Jusepe de Ribera or the master sculptor Cosimo Fanzago; the development of pasta and pizza as popular dishes. Golden ages tend to have their dark sides, and the same era gave birth to some of Naples' more shameful legacies, such as the Camorra gangsters, who can be traced back to the petty hoodlums and Spanish soldiers of the time. But amongst the city's many achievements, one of the most overlooked is the first integral fairy tale collection.

Cosmopolis

Down at the port, as noisy as anywhere else in Naples: the rustling of sails unfolding under the whistling spars, the squeal of windlasses as crates are winched down to the log ramps, the yelling of the sailors in the rigging and the merchants on the docks who've been waiting impatiently for their goods to arrive. Here at the mouth of the city you see how it communicates with others. In Giambattista's Naples, the connections with the trading networks of the Mediterranean were as pungent as the smells of nutmeg and musk in the customs depots. 'Africa furnisheth them with skinnes,' wrote the English traveller George Sandys, who passed through in the 1610s, 'Spain with cloth and gold; Elba with steele and iron; and we with our countries commodities: so that nothing is wanting.' In an age of seafarers, when power was invested in the nations that could best marshal their fleets across the seas, the busy docks of Naples were the key to the city's international standing. And just as she drew in wares from across the world, so she drew in a cosmopolitan range of people.

Not that all the Neapolitans were pleased about this: 'Nowhere in the world,' wrote Capaccio scathingly, 'is there anything so obtrusive and undisciplined, the result of the mixture and confusion of so many races . . . miserable, beggarly and mercenary folk of a kind such as to undermine the wisest constitution of the best of republics, the dregs of humanity . . .'

Similar prejudices, reflecting the values of lettered men of the time, trickle into Giambattista's writing. Stories may be set as far apart as Egypt and Scotland, but the qualities of other nations aren't always admired. In the tale 'The She-Bear', for example, a wife-hunting king spurns an international smorgasbord of potential queens, like an online dater swiping through Tinder: 'the Spanish woman displeased him because of her sallow colour . . . the German seemed to him cold and icy, the French-woman too feather-brained, and the Venetian looked like a distaff of flax with her bleached hair'. When it comes to the spoils, homespun heroes and heroines win the day. The frame tale sets the tone, for Giambattista chose to build his entire collection around the duplicitous actions of an African slave, the wily Lucia, who steals Princess Zoza's reward while the heroine is sleeping.

There were ten thousand slaves in Giambattista's Naples (around three per cent of the population – so many they had their own Neapolitan-Moorish patois). As in other parts of Europe, they were prisoners of war, captives from raids, sold by their families to pay off debts, exchanged in

the slave markets that flourished on either side of the Mediterranean, presented as gifts between nobles and enlisted to decorate the courts. Slavery was embedded in the economic fabric of Giambattista's world. So it's little surprise that it features in his tales.

In the final story before the climax, a black slave-girl looks into the water, and instead of a 'black crow' sees a 'white dove', in the form of a beautiful fairy, sitting in a tree above her. 'Me no thick-lipped slave,' she declares, mistaking the reflection for her own, 'me so beautiful'. To Giambattista's readership, she was a figure of ridicule, lampooned for her pretensions to beauty – a troubling example of the racial dimension underpinning European beauty myths. When she tricks the prince into marrying her, on the false basis that she'll turn into a white-faced fairy every other year, the lusty royal reflects the attitudes of Giambattista and his peers: 'Who draped with black mourning the freshly whitewashed house where I thought I would take all my pleasures?' Between the many delights of the *Tales*, these moments are hard to swallow, reminding us of how distant we are from Giambattista's world (and, in some disturbing ways, how close).

Still, there are layers to Giambattista's racial stereotyping. In the tale of 'Rosella', a Christian prince is captured by a Turkish sultan, who fattens up the prince so he can use his blood to cure his leprosy. While in captivity, the prince falls in love with the sultan's daughter, Rosella. She helps the prince escape, but her sorceress mother casts a hex upon him so that he forgets Rosella as soon as he reaches home. Finding herself forgotten by her beloved, a stranger in Christian territory, Rosella takes a house near the royal palace, and quickly attracts interest. 'Sonnets arrived in a frenzy, messages in floods, musical compositions in stupefying quantities, and there was enough hand kissing to make your asshole itch.' She uses and outwits her suitors – a door that can never be closed bamboozles one prospective lover, a candle that can never be snuffed outfoxes another. Rubbing their bruised egos, the befuddled suitors petition the king, and Rosella is summoned. At last: the opportunity she's been awaiting! She's been mistreated, she explains, forced into a demeaning existence 'hardly appropriate for her status'. The prince recovers his memory, Rosella is converted to Christianity, 'and they were more satisfied than anyone who has ever borne the yoke of matrimony'.

So, despite being born a ‘Turk’, Rosella is allowed to fashion her own happy ending. She has the appropriate high-born status, and the ‘stain’ of her Turkish ancestry can be ‘undone’ by the magical transformation of baptism. Here we see the colourism behind seventeenth-century racism, whereby ‘Turchi’ and ‘Mori’ were granted better treatment than ‘Negri’ (for example, when Turkish ship captains were captured, they could expect to be ransomed and treated with deference, whereas African princes enjoyed no such privilege). Lucia and Rosella both reflect the cosmopolitanism of Giambattista’s world as well as its limitations.

Academy of Idlers

‘Here I go, my beautiful Naples,’ declares one of Giambattista’s heroes, ‘I’m leaving you! Who knows if I’ll ever be able to see you again, bricks of sugar and walls of sweet pastry, where the stones are manna in your stomach, the rafters are sugarcane, the doors and windows puff pastry?’

For slaves and street-dwellers – the lower class known as *lazzaroni* – indigence and misery might have been the most likely fate. But if you were lucky enough to belong to the right social echelon, Naples was Pleasure Island. To walk around it, even today, is to glimpse Giambattista’s world: where your shoes scrape against slabs of yellow *tufo* or hardened block lava, as you’re swept forward by the momentum of the crowd, burning on wide-open, sun-fried piazzas, hurling yourself into the welcome shade of dark, narrow alleys.

Giambattista’s Naples worm-holes through the centuries when you stop at a pastry shop for a shell-shaped, ricotta-filled *sfogliatella* (which first appeared in the fairy teller’s lifetime), or pick up a bottle of *Strega* liquor, named after the ‘witches’ who were said to haunt the countryside around Naples. There may be no litter-bearers yelling each other out of the way – instead, it’s all moped riders with thumbs welded to their horn switches, achieving levels of ear torture that Giambattista’s age would have matched with street-criers’ trumpets. *Cornicelli*, ‘little horns’ the shape and colour of red peppers (symbolic red phalluses derived from the Graeco-Roman god Priapus) hang over doorways and windows as lucky charms; and people in search of a blessing kiss the bronze bust of Pulcinella, a long-nosed, pot-bellied buffoon invented by seventeenth-century entertainers as

a comic stock character (if you wander around Naples' Old City today, you may even bump into a walking Pulcinella, offering lottery tickets and sprinkling customers with rock salt for luck; the character was exported to Britain, where it evolved into the puppet-show anti-hero Punch).

Under the saint-encrusted *guglia*, decorative obelisks raised in honour of plague victims, there are holy figures gleaming over candles in street-corner shrines and the low doors of the *bassi*, the cheap ground-floor dwellings described in the *Tales*, which remind us that for all the magical transformations and fantastical creatures, these stories were assembled out of the world that Giambattista and his readers recognised. Artists of the time didn't need cameras to show the filth and splendour in which they trod. And one of them produced a painting that enables us to step back four centuries, as if Giambattista's city is still pouring its madness around us.

Step down the Via dei Tribunali, which cuts through the Old City, under cracked stone and chipped cornices, the worn scowls of stucco gods and glistening *cornicelli*. Behind a five-arched portico and the sombre gaze of marble saints, enter the small chapel of the Pio Monte della Misericordia. '*Zitto non pipitare!*' as Giambattista would say ('Shut up, not a peep!'). Cocooned in a sepulchral silence, you gaze across the octagonal room and your eyes settle on a brooding rectangle of canvas, an all-too-rare example of a masterpiece hanging in the very spot for which it was painted.

This is Caravaggio's *Seven Acts of Mercy*.

Hovering like the spectators in a theatre box, winged angels bear the Virgin and Child, witnesses to the sordid realities of Neapolitan street life. Beneath them, a man in a loincloth slides across the ground while a nobleman in a feathered hat snips a strip off his cloak to clothe him. Behind the nobleman, a shadowy figure slakes his thirst with the drops of liquid inside an ass's jawbone, receding into a darkness matched on the other side of the canvas, where a tavern-keeper holds a torch for a pall-bearer whose thigh is grazed by the feet of a corpse. Tucked under the inn is the grate of a jail, where a woman in a white bonnet bares her breast to a thirsty prisoner, whose beard is flecked with her milk, delineated with white lead.

Under the mobile, flickering light this crowded tableau has the jostling energy of contemporary accounts of Naples, the pressure-cooker atmosphere of a place that drives people over the barriers of conventional

decency – whether a pauper grovelling naked on the floor, a man drinking from an animal fossil, or a woman giving her breast to a thirsty prisoner. It's a painting of manifold layers, folding everyday scenes into biblical examples of mercy; a painting that reminds us that art worthy of the name is rarely separate from real life, however distant it may at first appear.

The Pio Monte della Misericordia was named for a foundation, set up in 1601 by seven noblemen for the purpose of charitable deeds. Every Friday they would bring food and comfort to the poor and needy, developing an institution that supplied forty hospital beds for the poor and paid for Masses for the dead. Like the wealthy philanthropists of today, the noblemen expected their endeavours to be commemorated; and for Baroque philanthropists, commemoration didn't come much better than having your chapel painted by a genius.

It was Giovanni Battista Manso, the marquis of Villa, Giambattista's very useful aristocratic contact, who commissioned Caravaggio's painting. Manso was a one-man Arts Council, cultivating friendships with poets such as Torquato Tasso, philosophers such as the proto-communist prisoner Tommaso Campanella, as well as scientists such as Galileo. He also sponsored a wandering poet called Giambattista Marino, who sat alongside Giambattista Basile in early meetings of Manso's club for literary gentlemen. With the tongue-in-cheek humour typical of these set-ups, it was called the Academia degli Oziosi – the Academy of Idlers.

Marino's densely allusive poetry may not be flying off the shelves of Mondadori today, but he was one of the most celebrated wordsmiths of the time, admired by John Milton, among others, and his distinctive style spawned its own adjective – *marinismo.* With his madcap irregularity, he had a knack for shocking through surreal imagery, such as his 'Woman Combing Her Hair', in which a miniaturised lover flounders in 'that golden sea, which, as it curled, opened its stormy blond treasure' – the golden hair of his beloved.

Marino's surreal images would have appealed to Giambattista. In one of his letters he described encountering, on his travels, bugs 'so beastly elephantine that whoever would strip them of their hide would make a great profit by making boots from it' – which is mirrored by the image of a giant insect hide displayed in Giambattista's tale 'The Flea'. This relish for dizzying swings in scale is a feature of both their work, echoed in the seal chosen by Giambattista for his membership of the Academy of Idlers.

Recycled from the Academy of Eccentrics in Crete, it was a snail at the foot of a mountain. It suggests a man who recognised the individual's impotence against fortune's merciless gradients, 'raising people you wouldn't deign to kick out of a bean field to great heights', as Giambattista puts it in one of his tales, 'and beating to the ground people who are the flower of mankind'.

Between them, artists like Marino, Caravaggio and Giambattista depicted their world with granular intensity. Although, on the surface, magic tales and morbid tableaux don't appear to have much in common, a painter like Caravaggio, who visualised biblical scenes through the people he observed around him, was singing from the same song sheet as a storyteller like Giambattista, setting tales of ogres and witches in the streets of contemporary Naples. But there's one matter on which Caravaggio and Giambattista would have certainly disagreed – the best place for a good night out.

Down the narrowest alley in Naples, so tight it feels like you're groping through a crack in a cave. Light glows at the throat of this corridor, and you pass under dangling corncobs into a barrel-vaulted hall where diners are dipping their heads over octopus meatballs and mussel soup. Giambattista described the Locanda del Cerriglio as 'the funhouse . . . where laughter abounds'. Not so much for Caravaggio. There, in October 1609, he was ambushed by four armed men and struck across the face with a sword. Violence was his element, as much as paint – he only snuck out to Naples because he'd fatally wounded a fellow ruffian in the groin. Although the disfigured artist managed to flee the tavern with his life, his luck was running out. A few months later fever took him on his way back to Rome.

The Locanda del Cerriglio is a fitting final stop for a tour of Giambattista's Naples. All stripes of society gathered there, summed up by a contemporary poet: 'at one table you saw a hangman, another a lady of the night, now you saw Basile, and now Cortese . . .' You'd have been likely to see them all at the same time, for Giulio Cortese was Giambattista's great friend and mutual devotee of the Neapolitan vernacular (and he celebrated the Locanda in a seven-canto poem from 1628, 'The Enchanted Cerriglio').

What they came for is what we find in all their work – in Giambattista's fairy tales and Caravaggio's paintings as well as Cortese's verses: life,

high and low. Fantasy and mythology costumed their scenes, but the men and women were drawn from the streets. Between them, they conjured a vision of seventeenth-century Naples – frantic and crime-sodden, where nobody's fortune is safe and anything goes – that allows us to step up to the brink of their world and peer inside.

But spend too long with Caravaggio, Cortese et al., and claustrophobia consumes you. Fortunately, one of these artists can offer relief. For Giambattista's tales drag us through the city gates, away from the urban stench and the filth of the docks, out into the wonders of the countryside . . .

The Tale of the Flea

The king of high mountain has been bitten by a flea, and he is enraptured. What a beautiful creature it is! He feeds himself to his hematophagic guest until it grows to the size of a sheep and dies. So gargantuan is its hide that nobody can guess the creature's identity, and the king issues a proclamation: whoever can answer this riddle will marry his daughter.

Noblemen flock to this bridal contest – one says it's the skin of a lynx, another suggests a crocodile. But none can hit the mark until an ogre appears, a creature so hideous he would make the bravest young man shit his pants. With a single sniff, the ogre identifies it: 'the ringleader of all fleas'.

Discovering she will have to marry the ogre, Princess Porziella is furious: 'What sort of bad manners have I used with you,' she asks her father, 'to be delivered into the hands of this bogeyman?' But the king insists his pledge must be kept, and sends her off with her revolting groom.

Dragged to a hut in the heart of a forest, Porziella pines for her former life 'in the midst of plenty', until an old woman passes by. Pouring out her sob story, she wins the old woman's pity and the aid of her seven sons. Each of them has a special gift – one can make a sea of soap out of his spit, another can turn a piece of iron into a field of razors, another can raise a tower from a stone. Porziella escapes with these remarkable brothers, but the ogre sets off in pursuit. They keep him back with their soapy sea, razor-field and other tricks, but the ogre is relentless. Finally, they conjure a tower. When the ogre climbs up to reach them, they shoot him down with a crossbow and slit his throat like a lump of ricotta. So Porziella is freed from the husband she never wanted, and the seven sons are loaded with gifts by the king, who has been repenting of his folly ever since he sent his daughter away.

Chapter 2

The Siren of Posillipo

While Giambattista was still in Crete, fending off the mortar-pieces of the Ottoman navy, or more likely swapping crazy tales with his fellow savants in the Academy of Eccentrics, a real-life fairy tale was happening in his own family.

‘The Siren of Posillipo’, they called her, ‘la bella Adriana’. By the time of Giambattista’s homecoming, his sister was being feted by some of the biggest spenders in Italy. So determined was the Duke of Mantua to win her services that he wrote her seven letters in a single day. ‘Signora Adriana,’ declared the duke’s chief composer, the great Claudio Monteverdi, ‘lends the music such power and so special a grace, bringing such delight to the senses that the place becomes almost like a new theatre.’ In the same letter Monteverdi noted that guards were posted at the venue where she was singing, because there were so many ‘ladies and knights from the entire court, but also more than a hundred other gentlemen from the city too’.

If only we could listen to Adriana’s voice today. She did more than just snap up a few good notices for a couple of seasons. For twenty years she was the most celebrated virtuosa in Italy. Giambattista’s fellow academician, Giambattista Marino, praised the ‘beautiful Adriana’ in his bestselling epic poem *Adonis* (1623), ‘who seeks with her sweet song to bring forth sweet sentiments and with her life and her voice she goes along launching Cupid’s arrows’. Her fame even spread outside of Italy: the king of Poland offered substantial expenses if she would attend his court.

Adriana knew her worth. Before arriving in Mantua she insisted on a letter of invitation from the duchess and a formal request to the viceroy and vicereine in Naples. In his letters, Monteverdi recorded his efforts to retain her at the Mantuan court, ‘compelled to assure her how much the

Most Illustrious Lords . . . honoured and esteemed her', as he put it to the cardinal, 'and even more so how much your Eminence did'.

Special as she was, Adriana was no outlier. Seventeenth-century Naples struck a rich vein of powerful women in the arts – at least, compared with the rest of Europe at the time. These included creators like the painter Giovanna Garzoni as well as curators like the print shop manager Caterina di Silvestro (who took on her late husband's lucrative business after his death, joining the ranks of working widows allowed to operate commercially without being sullied by scandal).

Each had her own complicated trajectory, but if anyone reflects the challenges faced by artistic women of the time, it's the painter Artemisia Gentileschi. She was known to the Basiles: she painted Adriana, a portrait so lifelike it was said by a contemporary poet that you could hear the singer's voice when you looked at it; and she probably knew Giambattista, who composed a masquerade she attended, in honour of the viceroy's wife. Her art also offers, like Caravaggio's, a side glimpse into Giambattista's world. In her case, it points us towards the storyteller's treatment of women.

Artemisia grew up in Rome, a painter's daughter, instructed on the techniques of perspective by a well-known expert in illusionistic architecture called Agostino Tassi, who was a friend of her father's. Not much of a friend, it turned out. He pursued Artemisia sexually, and when she turned him down, he raped her. A year later her father sued Tassi for 'defloration', but in keeping with a torrid practice of the time, Artemisia was compelled to 'prove' the truth of her testimony by having her fingers tortured with thumbscrews. Discretely married off, soon afterwards, to the brother of a family friend, she gave birth to five children, only one of whom survived infancy. A life full of pain, yet from these brutal experiences she produced some of the most radical paintings of the century, as ravishing in their colours as they are arresting in their depictions of complex, adversarial women. Her most famous canvas shows the biblical Judith slaying the giant Holofernes, alongside a maidservant. The women's sleeves are rolled up, their faces tight in concentration as they skewer the giant's neck with a dagger, like a couple of kitchen servants plucking a chicken.

Realistic depictions of women, actively involved in securing their own fates, are Gentileschi's métier. Among her Neapolitan paintings is *Corisca*

and the Satyr, in which an enraged satyr, believing he's caught a mischievous nymph by the hair, discovers he's only holding a fistful of wig. Clasping the folds of an ochre dress, the rosy-cheeked nymph looks back at him with a playful smirk. The scene is based on a contemporary play, *Pastor Fido* by Giovanni Battista Guarini, so popular that Giambattista quotes from it at the beginning of *The Tale of Tales*, when he's describing the impromptu flashing of the old woman's fanny – the spark behind Zoza's curse. Although their art trailed off in different directions, it was influenced by a discourse in which they were mutual participants.

Highlighting Gentileschi helps us understand Giambattista all the better. He was a man of his time, and he littered his tales with conventional jokes about female 'vices', like curiosity and vanity. His peculiar tale 'The Woman Who Was Skinned' is a classic of Renaissance misogyny: a randy king lures an old woman to bed, convinced she must be 'the flower of all tenderness' because she and her sister have been moaning about all the noise he makes, and when he discovers 'a harpy in the place of a nymph' he has her thrown out of his window. But when a gang of fairies transforms her into a beautiful maiden, the king decides he wouldn't mind having her in his bed after all. However, this leaves her haggardly sister fuming with envy, and when the newly beautified queen tells her 'I skinned myself', she pays a barber to debride her – which he does, with fatal results.

Idiosyncratic as this tale certainly is ('it is one of the tales that we think may be the product of Basile's imagination,' says his recent translator Nancy Canepa), there is something heroic about the old women Giambattista lampoons. They fight for their fortunes, with strikingly mixed results: one ends up dead, but the other gets to be a queen.

This active willpower is one of the most appealing features of the *Tales* today. Whether Zoza setting out on her journey to undo a curse, Rosella outwitting her suitors with her magical skills, or the no-nonsense ogre's daughter Filadoro, who cuts short a lusty prince, declaring, 'I am a woman who knows how to take her own measure, and I do not need others to serve as my ruler', Giambattista builds his stories around women fighting with all the resources at their disposal. For all their flaws, and for all the platitudes of conventional misogyny sprinkled throughout the book, they are rarely silent or inactive.

‘Oh father, cruel father, you could not possibly have been born of human flesh!’ declares Porziella, in the tale of ‘The Flea’. She gnashes against her fate, and – her dependence on her male rescuers notwithstanding – represents the kind of female vocalisation all too absent from later collections. Giambattista, surrounded by influential women like his sister Adriana, was rendering his world. But he was doing something else. His heroines swim against the tide of later fairy telling – the sweet, biddable princesses who came to dominate the genre – because the cliché hadn’t set. Reading *The Tale of Tales* is to be reminded the rules were still in flux. How different things might have been if Giambattista’s heroines – his objectors and outwitters, his shouters, his interrupters – had dominated fairy-telling history, instead of the paper-dolls set down later by the likes of Charles Perrault and the Brothers Grimm.

Court in the Forest

Adriana’s rise to fame and fortune was a blessing for Giambattista, who spent most of his career hanging on to her coat-tails. Thanks to his sister, he secured lucrative posts at the courts of Italy, writing masques and other entertainments for the princes who employed him. When Adriana moved to Mantua, he joined her entourage and served the duke from 1612 to 1613. When she returned to Naples in 1626, the viceroy appointed him a local governor to keep Adriana happy.

Prestigious these positions may have been, but they were also conspicuously brief. We find Giambattista in Montemarano in 1615, in Zungoli in 1617, and the following year in Avellino, serving at the court of Prince Marino Caracciolo II, who made him governor of Avellino in 1619. The brevity of such postings is explained by Giambattista himself, who didn’t hold back when it came to pinning down the pitfalls of a courtly career. ‘Just look at those who serve in the courts,’ he wrote in a preface to his friend Cortese’s *Epic of the Servant Girl* (printed in 1612): ‘you serve now, you serve later, you serve today, you serve tomorrow . . . and then, suddenly, it’s night for you, you’re told to turn yourself around and get out!’ Reminding us this is an author whose pseudonym meant ‘the dejected one’, the *Tales* pull no punches when it comes to depicting ‘that hell that goes by the name of court’.

If any of the courts suited him, it was Avellino, where he spent a couple of years working for Prince Marino. Thirty-five miles east of Naples, it's a sleepy town where houses press close in the older part of town, sharing shadow space and the lines of laundry strung between their balconies. Giambattista's era is well represented, thanks to the architect Cosimo Fanzago, whose Fountain of Bellerophon squats under a clock tower attributed to him, while his bust is medallioned on a pillar. Behind the Baroque cathedral, with its acanthus-leaf capitals winding up to nave paintings of patriarchs, the old castle languishes in a weed-throttled sump, a ruin of crumbly grey stone like the misshapen rubble left after a giant's stampede.

This is the afterglow of Giambattista's world. Avellino went into decline soon after his death – earthquake and plague crushed its population, and the region sank into a sleepy oblivion from which none of the seismic events in later Italian history have shaken it. Easy prey for gangsters, Avellino atrophied into a Camorra stronghold, celebrated in twenty-first-century fiction as the birthplace of Tony Soprano. But the faint light of Giambattista's era has continued to shine through the darkness, inspiring a revival of the Accademia dei Dogliosi (Academy of the Sorrowful, founded in 1620), which counted Giambattista as one of its earliest members.

Re-established after a hiatus of nearly two centuries, under the auspices of the same noble family that patronised Giambattista, the Accademia meets at regular intervals, listening to readings from Baroque and Renaissance-era poets, research by local historians and folk songs performed in a restaurant named after the traditional misfit Pulcinella (when I attended, we were treated to a soulful rendition of the nineteenth-century serenade 'Return to Sorrento' and a dish containing eight ingredients beginning with the letter P – the kind of wordplay that Giambattista would have relished).

'We believe that Basile wrote his tales here in Avellino,' said the academy's president, Professor Fiorentino Vecchiarelli, leaning over dishes of aubergine meatballs and mushrooms swimming in melted cheese. So goes the local legend: while he was stationed at Prince Marino's court, Giambattista scribbled down his tales, part of a cultural revival fostered by the prince.

Of his many patrons, Prince Marino was certainly one of the most artistically inclined: the image of Giambattista narrating tales to tickle the prince's funny bone is as tempting as the pancetta, porcini mushrooms and *prezzemolo* I ate with the Accademia. Wounded in battle at an early age, the prince turned to the arts, filling his court with writers and painters, and even hired a poet as his barber. His protégés included Cosimo Fanzago and the melodrama writer Maiolino Bisaccioni. As for Giambattista, he was an ideal personality for a prince's court, 'so quick in prose and verse', as Bisaccioni recalled, 'that I very often marvelled at how in a few hours he could come up with a large and good mixture of things'. And Giambattista repaid Marino's patronage, dedicating his idyll *L'Aretusa*, among other verses, to the prince.

It was one of many appointments that drove Giambattista around southern Italy. These were crucial experiences, for they introduced him to the rural petitioners – local landlords and, perhaps, those with little more than smallholdings, who came to appeal against the heavy baronial taxes. Was this how Giambattista gathered his tales? He was an instinctive storyteller and a sociable man, and his ears would have twitched at the first sign of a tale. In an early letter, written in 1604, he complained of his boredom in the Calabrian countryside, admitting, 'to tell you the truth, I have no other pastime than filling up little pieces of paper with old wives' tales'; another letter is cluttered with the same traditional games and pastimes that reappear in *The Tale of Tales*. More interested in storytelling than his administrative duties, he wouldn't have been the most efficient choice for feudal rulers eager to eke every last ounce out of their subjects.

To travel to Campanian hill towns like Avellino is to experience the forested landscape that divided the courts and flourished in Giambattista's tales. Jets of steam swirl skywards, rising not from campfires but from magma chambers pouring their gases through vents in the earth: the fumaroles that Giambattista's contemporaries took for portals to the underworld. Invigorated by the volcanic soil, olive groves and vineyards swag the hills between the woods, edged by streams that murmur under chestnut trees and oaks whose branches, riddled in nests, are so chatty with birdlife they sound as if their occupants are mimicking the street life of Naples.

Leaves rustled my fingers as I wandered these forested hills, with a warm touch of morning sunlight; branches creaked under mossy sleeves

where I vaulted the streams. I sat against brindled trunks to read from the *Tales*, encountering a heroine born from a myrtle branch, another popping out of a citron, and fairies slumbering in an oak tree bower. Around my feet, mushrooms were plentiful – brown-capped porcini, cup-shaped chanterelles poking around the roots of oaks, smelling faintly of apricots. My feet turned over acorns and there were plenty of chestnuts and hazelnuts: the same nuts from which Giambattista's heroine Zoza conjures the golden chicks and magic doll that infect the slave-queen Lucia with her addiction to stories. The forest isn't just a passive backdrop for the tales; it's an active furnisher of narrative turning points. Not only does it throw up obstacles and offer shelter; sometimes it conjures the heroes and their lovers out of its own fertile components.

The woods are where magic happens, and they dominate Giambattista's tales as much as the better-known German forests of the Brothers Grimm. In 'The Flea', Porziella is dragged from her father's kingdom of 'High Mountain' down into the forest, where 'the rivers complained that when they flowed in the dark they tripped on stones, and the wild animals . . . wandered safely through the thickets – in which no one ever entered unless he had lost his way.'

The poet's imagery for the forest switches between freedom and disorientation. You come to the forest to escape the hassles of court and town life – taxes, regulations, all the ways your life is knocked about by the powerful. But for heroes and heroines, a forest life is transient. It offers refuge until they can return to the court, to the castle, to prosperity and wedded bliss. Very few stories stage their happy-ever-after amongst the trees. Stay too long and you'll become a 'man of the woods', an outcast . . . a witch. In Giambattista's tales, there's a name for long-term residents of the forest, and it isn't very nice.

They are known as 'ogres'.

The Kindness of Ogres

In the first of Giambattista's tales (following the frame story about Princess Zoza), we meet a bandy-legged, flat-footed figure, 'his forehead all lumpy, his eyebrows joined; his eyes popped out of his head, his nose was dented by two horse's nostrils that looked like two sewer mains'. He

could be one of those rural petitioners – he looks like ‘a filthy pauper’, we’re told, and he lives ‘at the foot of a grotto decorated in pumice stone’ – which in southern Italy, especially in the Basilicata, was the reality for many people until the mid twentieth century.

But this is a fairy tale, and so he is an ogre.

Fall guys to fortune hunters, ogres trudge through the tales, trampled on by better-looking heroes, exploited for their hospitality and magical powers. In ‘The Seven Little Doves’, seven brothers live with a blind ogre who ‘supplied them with what they needed to stay alive’. They remain on good terms until the ogre tries to eat their sister, so they push him into a ditch and shovel earth on top. In another story, ‘Green Meadow’, the heroine discovers that ogre lard will heal the wounds of her beloved, so she waits until an ogre has fallen asleep, then disembowels him. Before this happens, she overhears the ogre giving his wife a report on the state of the world – ‘buffoons rewarded, scoundrels esteemed, lazybones honoured’ – which echoes Giambattista’s many reports on the injustices of court life. Their habits may be uncouth, and their looks unsightly, but the ogres tend to know what’s what.

Of all the tales about ogres, the one that’s rooted deepest in my mind is ‘The Flea’. Abominated by courtly society, the ogre proves smarter than all of them, on one count at least: when the king displays a flea’s carapace, only the ogre can determine its origin. Rewarded with Princess Porziella, he drags his reluctant bride back to his home, ‘dark as a clogged chimney and frightening as the facade of hell’, and does his best to please her. ‘Now you can’t complain, my dear wife, that I don’t take care of you,’ he says, on bringing her the remains of slain men for her supper. ‘Here’s a nice supply of things to go with your bread.’ The magician youths who help her escape are rewarded with riches. But the ogre’s background is less easily forgiven. However much he tries to please the princess – and to be fair to him, he gives it his best shot – this is an unnatural match that fairy tale tradition couldn’t abide (several centuries would have to pass before *Shrek* and the Princess Fiona could couple up for a genuine ogre–princess love match). So the ogre must die, his body as expendable as cheese.

Giambattista’s storytelling is built on ambiguous layers, which makes it vulnerable to misconstruction. A storyteller can empathise with the difficult lives of the same people he is simultaneously dehumanising. As Peter Robb has written in *Street Fight in Naples*, ‘the monsters were the

dirty rural poor, known to Giambattista's audience as their own brutalized vassals or the wild displaced persons wandering the streets of Naples, the wrinkled and wild-haired old people who were being painted as philosophers and saints'. Regional administrators like Giambattista glimpsed the lives of the rural poor as they moved around the provinces. 'Now let's leave these ogres' tales behind,' he wrote in an early letter, after recounting a run-in with an old forest-dweller. Whether he stepped inside their grottoes, his imagination reacted with the textures of their lives to produce some of the most evocative sequences in the *Tales*.

'We must remember,' said Donato Cascione, an octogenarian poet who grew up in a cave house in the Basilicata region, 'that magic is an expression of misery or poverty. To help people deal with the many problems they face, the hard work, the mortality of infants, the sickness and disease, they take refuge in magic and superstition.' Donato should know. Indicating the limestone cliff homes where he was raised, he told me, 'We called it the Circle of Hell of the Sassi. It was like Dante's Inferno.'

I spent an afternoon with Donato, in his *lamione* in the old quarter of Matera: a low-roofed cavern domesticated with blocks of limestone, where light slid off the tips of saws and spanners and horseshoes. There was a shoeshiner's bench, a knife grinder's mechanism with a stone wheel, a blacksmith's bellows that looked like it might be the carcase of a giant flea (Donato had been salvaging the debris of the old life for many decades). Among his childhood memories, he mentioned the 'fascinations' conducted by local witches (a woollen plait secreted under a mattress to captivate a woman; a potion of menstrual blood and pubic hair baked in the bread oven, to enchant a man); the labelling of damp and mould as 'devil's sweat'; the keeping of brooms near house entrances to fend off witches.

These are the seeds out of which stories like Giambattista's grew. In southern Italy, as in many other places around the world, magical beliefs still have an important role to play in the community. To glimpse them today is to be reminded, as the professional storyteller Domenico Rea put it: 'Basile appears to be telling fairy tales, but he is actually describing the dreadfulness of real life down here on earth.'

It is from this all too tangible world that Giambattista's ogres were formed. Monsters they may be, but they are also husbands and wives,

fathers and mothers. They are often kind, sometimes shrewd, mostly generous, and they always end up losing. Which suggests that Giambattista knew how to ‘see straight through’, like his ill-fated ogres. The truly blind, after all, are the ones with their noses in the air.

The Tale of the Girl Who Lost Her Shoe

Poor Zezolla! Her father's a nobleman, but he's fallen on hard times. He's also remarried, and her stepmother's a bitch. She's just about had enough when her tutor suggests what she should do: ask to pick out some rags from an old clothes chest, and while her stepmother's looking inside, drop the lid on her head. Snap goes her stepmother's neck, and Zezolla's misery has surely come to an end.

Not so fast . . . the tutor, given a ringing endorsement by Zezolla, becomes her new stepmother and brings six daughters along with her. So much for an improvement – now Zezolla's life is even worse! Forced to labour in the kitchens, she sleeps at the hearth, smeared in so much ash and soot, they nickname her Cenerentola (or 'Cinders'). But a fairy is looking out for her. Emerging magically from a date pot, this supernatural being gives Zezolla an instant makeover and packs her off to a ball hosted by the local prince.

Three times, Zezolla sets off to party. First, she rides a white thoroughbred with twelve pages in tow, then she's ensconced in a horse-drawn coach, and finally she parades through the town 'accompanied by so many servants that she looked like a whore arrested in the public promenade and surrounded by police agents'.

The last party is such a blast she leaves it till the very last moment before fleeing. She's in such a rush that she loses one of her shoes, a *chianiello* to be precise: a high-heeled cork clog. Brought to the lovesick prince, the chianiello becomes the focus of his ardour. Whoever fits the shoe will be his bride, so all the women of the kingdom gather to try their luck. After hundreds have failed to squeeze their foot inside the tiny clog, it's Zezolla's turn. She doesn't even have to try – the shoe attaches to her foot 'like iron runs to a magnet'. With equal magnetism, she's clamped inside the prince's arms, seated under a royal canopy with a crown on her head, and her stepsisters shuffle back home, choking on their bile.

Chapter 3

The Limbs of Death and Hell

> I heard all of a sudden a strange sound in the air, like when several drums are slammed all at once, but with a supernatural power. I pricked up my ears; right away the sound came again. It's Vesuvius erupting, I thought and ran over to the square . . . one side of the mountain was a river of fire flowing downward, and the crater was burning like a bonfire.

Here was a fairy teller's encounter with the Neapolitan volcano – not Giambattista, in this case, but Hans Christian Andersen. The Danish icon was writing in his diary on 16 February 1834, the year before he published his first fairy tales.

Two hundred and three years earlier, Vesuvius added Giambattista to its long list of victims. In a ferocious eruption in 1631, spumes of lava and smoke blasted out of the cone. According to a contemporary chronicler,

> the scourges of the conflagration were scarcely extinguished when the just God, perceiving that they [the Neapolitans] were not yet repentant, sent another kind of chastisement, namely a disease of the throat, which proved so cruel and contagious that it appeared to be the plague, and carried off numbers of the people in a short space of time . . . Among these were many notable people; and they went on dying day by day, and of those who perished suddenly were Don Giovanni d'Aquino, Prince of Pietrapulcina, and Giovan Battista Basile, one of the leading poets of our time . . .

The 'snail at the foot of a mountain'. So Giambattista proved to be: the little fellow labouring under the raging mountain when it sent down its murderous ash shower. He was still working as a court administrator (his last position took him to Gugliano, just a few miles from Naples, where he caught the fatal infection, aged fifty-six) and he was still scribbling, an unmarried feudal administrator slogging away for the courts. His last compositions included some grim lines about the 'harsh disaster of Vesuvius', where 'nothing is spared . . . from the spreading of ash and the pouring of fire, / but the limbs of death and hell'.

Although the volcano did take his life, fortunately his writings weren't reduced to ash. His sister, Adriana, now running her own salon in Rome, arranged the publication of his heroic epic *Teagene* in 1637. As for the curious manuscript of magical tales, she left that to a Neapolitan bookseller called Salvatore Scarrano.

The first edition of *The Tale of Tales*, printed in 1634, contained the first two of the five 'days'.[FN1] Over the next two years further volumes revealed the subsequent 'days'. They were 'received with great applause by the world', according to one of the early publishers. The first edition sold out and a partial reissue appeared in 1637. A bibliography of Neapolitan books, published in 1683, described them as 'this little book, which is in everyone's hands'. During the course of the seventeenth century six new editions were issued, followed by a further six in the eighteenth. The stories were recycled by Italian fabulists, notably the Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi, who adapted Giambattista's tales for his plays, *The Love of Three Oranges* and *The Crow*, part of a series of *Fairy Tales for the Theatre* that took eighteenth-century Italian theatre by storm. But it's the measure of Giambattista's impact that his stories managed to ripple so far beyond Italy.

Before the end of the seventeenth century they had reached Paris, judging by the fairy tellers who gathered there in the 1690s. One member of this circle, Charlotte-Rose Caumont de La Force, adapted his story 'Petrosinella' (a forerunner to 'Rapunzel') into her 'Persinette'; another, Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier de Villandon, modelled her 'Subtle Princess' on his 'Sapia Liccarda', both tales of wily heroines outwitting overly ravenous suitors, and his influence appears in two more of L'Héritier's tales. The most successful of the French fairy tellers, Charles Perrault, retold several of Giambattista's tales in his *Stories or Tales of Past Times*.[FN2]

In 1812 the Brothers Grimm described *The Tale of Tales* as 'a work as well known and beloved in Italy as it is seldom and unknown in Germany . . . in every respect a superb book'; a decade later they described 'Basile's collection with its rich contents as the very basis by which to evaluate all others'. After failing to succeed with the first two editions of their lengthy collection, the Grimms produced a selection of fifty tales in 1825, using *The Tale of Tales* as their model. It proved a winning formula. As we shall discover, some of their most iconic (and famously

‘Germanic’) tales, such as ‘Hansel and Gretel’, have striking similarities with stories written down much earlier by Giambattista.

But compatriots are often stingiest with praise, and so it was for Giambattista. Take the eighteenth-century economist, Ferdinando Galiani, who called the *Tales* ‘dull, monstrous and obscene’, insisting, ‘it is impossible to read it without vomiting even on an empty stomach’. Which sounds like the sort of reaction Giambattista would have relished.

Galiani had a point. The style of the *Tales* can be overwhelming – metaphors cartwheeling over interminable descriptive lists, obscure epigrams jostling with ferocious insults. One moment you’re dissecting a Latin proverb, the next you’re listening to a ‘fart throat, gas mouth, filthy gullet’ getting a dressing down from an apoplectic ogre. It’s a brave reader who dives in without checking the footnotes. But isn’t this the inconvenience of a partygoer wondering what all those tasty nibbles are made from? When you read *The Tale of Tales*, you feel as if the storyteller is there beside you, pinching you in the ribs, grabbing a mouthful of *sfogliatella* from your plate, lubricating his throat with another glass of Mangiaguerra before he starts his next tale.

No wonder another larger-than-life author was drawn to Giambattista. Sir Richard Burton, the polylingual explorer and inspiration for Victorian ladies’ fainting fits, made the first full-length English translation (published in 1893), but it attracted limited interest. It wasn’t until the twentieth century, when several new editions were produced, in Italian as well as English, that the *Tales* started to reclaim the popularity they had only really enjoyed in the immediate aftermath of their publication. Since then, they’ve inspired operatic and theatrical takes, abridgements for children’s versions, and even a lavish film in 2015, featuring Hollywood stalwarts Salma Hayek and John C. Reilly. Here’s the measure of Giambattista’s steady rise: eight decades after Walt Disney started milking the tales of the Grimms, finally his *fiabe* were tempting enough for the movie moguls.

The Cork-Heeled Skivvy

But Giambattista’s tales are still small-fry compared with the more popular versions they’ve inspired. His most celebrated story sits on top of

the storytelling tree like a Christmas fairy: the put-upon drudge, mistreated by her wicked stepsisters; the kindly girl attended by a sympathetic fairy, who only needs a smothering of bling to sucker-punch a prince's heart. Giambattista's version is called 'La Gatta Cenerentola', or 'The Cinderella Cat'. Although its origins stretch back much further, Giambattista's (which is widely recognised as 'The earliest European Cinderella', to quote *The Cinderella Story*) locked a number of key elements into the tale – including multiple stepsisters, the fairy beautician and the royal ball (not to mention the heroine's name, for 'Cenerentola' would evolve into the French 'Cendrillon' and the English 'Cinderella').

If fairy tales are universal, here's the proof: a story known in a thousand variations, stretching back to ninth-century China and beyond. Although aspects of the tale can be found in Herodotus' ancient Greek tale of Rhodopis, who marries the Pharaoh of Egypt after her shoe is dropped in his lap by an eagle, the oldest intact version was written by a Chinese bureaucrat called Duan Chengshi in *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang* in 853 ad. There's a skivvy (called Yeh-Shen), a mean stepmother and stepsister, a supernatural guardian (a magic fish whose bones transform into Yeh-Shen's guardian spirit, visiting her at the New Year festival and dressing her in a sea-green silk gown and a pair of golden slippers). There's a dazzling party and a dash to get home, leaving a single shoe behind; and there's a royal search for the girl who fits the slipper, which leads the enraptured king to Yeh-Shen's grotto.

Read 'Yeh-Shen' and you can feel 'Cinderella' bursting through the storytelling. But for all the similarities, the differences are equally beguiling. 'Yeh-Shen' is a charming tale because it's rooted in a Chinese landscape – the heroine's grotto, the magic fish in the river. It could hardly be more Chinese: the tininess of Yeh-Shen's feet (the reason only *she* can fit the shoe) is a reference to the culture of foot-binding that was becoming common practice amongst well-born women of the Tang dynasty. It's a troubling aspect of the tale that such a locally specific detail has travelled so easily. The attraction of tiny female feet, it turns out, is as universal as pizza.

From the global to the local: the most popular fairy tales are astonishingly agile at aping each other's structures while transplanting themselves to new locales. As we'll discover with some of the other tellers in this book, there's an eerie parallel between the trajectories of disease

and the pathways of stories: virulently contagious and cunningly adaptable.

So in Giambattista's tale the shoe becomes a chianiello – a cork-heeled platform bootie, originally created for court ladies to protect their slippers from the muck of the streets; crashing down the social scale, adopted by high-class courtesans, then ordinary street-walkers[FN3] – which adds another sly ambiguity. It's up to the reader to decide if Zezolla is the passive beneficiary of fairy magic, or the active driving force behind her own fate.

The clog is one of many details that root this 'universal' tale in the specific textures of Neapolitan life. There's the *gaifo*, the traditional Neapolitan 'balcony' from which Zezolla watches her father and stepmother setting out on their honeymoon, the bottle of *acqua di cocozza* (a cosmetic made from the squash plant, which is used by the fairy to prepare her for the ball), the ravioli and ricotta-filled pastries served to the women who try their luck with the shoe.

The strongest stories – the most virulent stories – feed off the nutrients of their new host landscape. We call them 'universal', but that misses the point. They don't resist the particular details of a new setting; rather, they absorb them. The specific and the universal are the ying and yang that give the stories equilibrium, the balance from which their power is derived.

Delving into *The Tale of Tales*, we find associations with tales from all over the world. 'Petrosinella', for example: the story of a girl trapped in a doorless tower by a witch, who lets down her extraordinarily long hair so a prince can climb up to meet her. The earliest known version appears in the eleventh-century Persian epic, the *Book of Kings*, in which the prince decides to find his own way up the tower because yanking a woman's hair is clearly not a gentlemanly thing to do (although, in this case, the correspondence is a single motif and Giambattista's remains the oldest known written version of the full tale). 'Sun, Moon, and Talia', about a princess who falls into a long sleep after pricking her finger on a spinning-wheel, retells a story from the medieval French romance *Perceforest* (first printed in 1528)*;* while the tale of 'Cagliuso' (a forerunner to 'Puss in Boots') is narrated in *The Facetious Nights* of Straparola, whose sixteenth-century book Giambattista would likely have encountered as a member of the Venetian-Cretan Academy of Eccentrics. We can even find parallels with Indian stories in the medieval *The Ocean of the Streams of Story*

(there are several examples, such as an Indian tale about a group of suitors squabbling over who should marry the beautiful woman they have rescued from a demon, which is echoed in Giambattista's tale 'The Five Sons').

Looking for these connections can drive you mad. There are so many, and the stories are so tangled up in each other, you can end up like a sleep-deprived star-spotter squinting into their telescope, worrying about the constellation that's been disrupted by another sparkle they hadn't expected to find. But *The Tale of Tales* is a clear staging post, albeit on a journey with no point of origin and no destination. Just as later tellers would adapt Giambattista's stories, so he retooled earlier versions that have disappeared in the same whirlpool of literary oblivion in which his own legacy has been obscured. As his contemporaries were discovering in astronomy, so with the history of fairy telling. Other storytellers may orbit around Giambattista's star, but if we widen the viewfinder, we find more stars, a never-ending cosmos of storytelling. Every story of Giambattista's can be traced to some other source, there's always somebody else who told it before Giambattista made it his own (see Figure 1).

This is how the history of fairy tales operates: stories splintering along zigzagging pathways, carrying long-sounding echoes that turn down narrative alleyways suggested elsewhere or replicate each other with astonishing exactitude. It's what gives *The Tale of Tales* its underlying thrust. When we dive into these stories, we're plunging into a refreshingly idiosyncratic collection, where heroes shout down their antagonists, pompous buffoons are covered in their own shit and kings end up regretting their foolish whims for fleas or nagging neighbours or transmogrifying fairies. But we're also confronting a familiar roll call of fairy tale characters. It's like looking at the distorted images in a fairground mirror, only to realise those lopsided features belong to people you recognise. Here are Cinderella, Rapunzel, Puss in Boots, Jack the Giant-Killer, the Sleeping Beauty, Hansel and Gretel, the Golden Goose, Beauty and the Beast. Many of them are making their debut in European literature, and most are only faintly recognisable behind their seventeenth-century Neapolitan disguises. Later tellers would reap the benefits of stripping these stories to their cores: the charming tale of Cenerentola, so spicily Neapolitan in Giambattista's rendition, so layered with ambiguities, would be peeled to a much simpler form by Charles Perrault, half a century later, and become one of the most popular tales in the

Frenchman's bestselling collection. But toning things down, stripping the textures, that wasn't Giambattista's style. To tear the trappings of his time from his characters would have been like having them skinned.

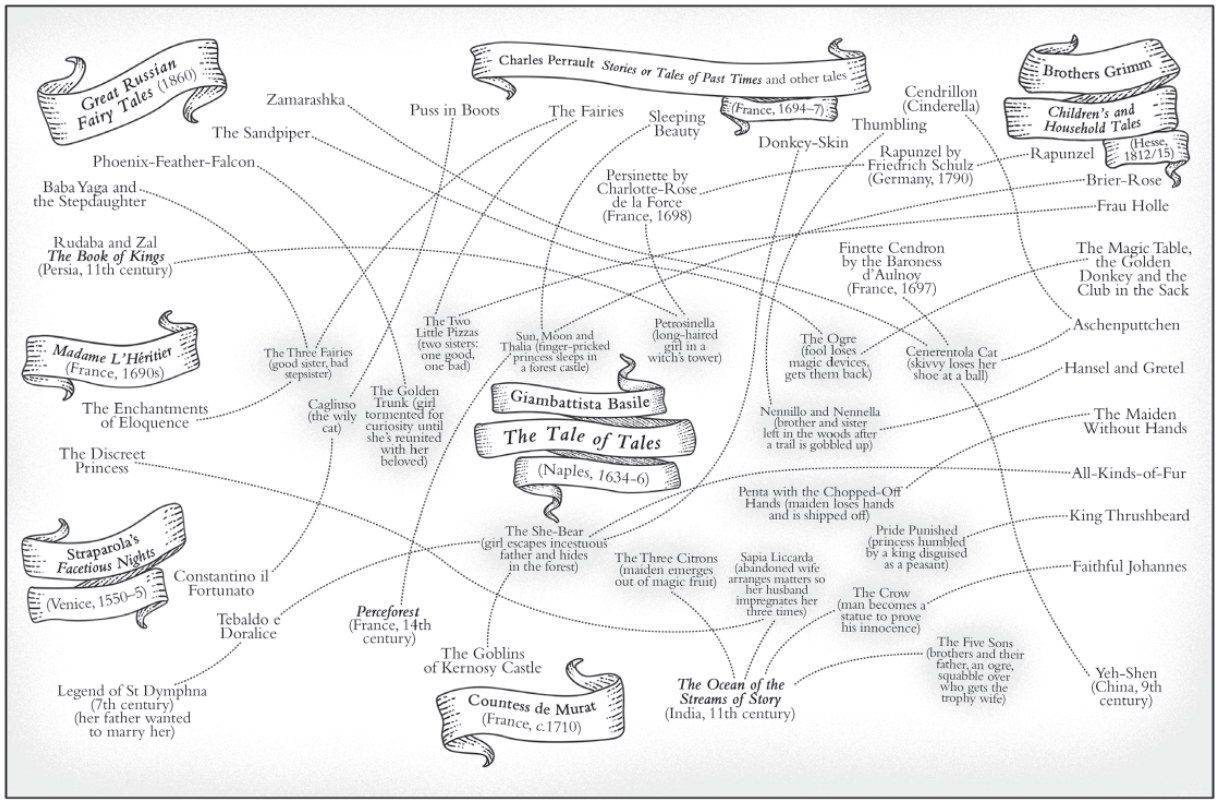

Great Russian Fairy Tales (1860)
Charles Perrault Stories or Tales of Past Times and other tales
(France, 1694–7)
Brothers Grimm
Children's and Household Tales
(Hesse, 1812/15)
Zamarashka
Puss in Boots
The Fairies
Sleeping Beauty
Cendrillon (Cinderella)
Thumbling
Donkey-Skin
The Sandpiper
Phoenix-Feather-Falcon
Rapunzel by Friedrich Schulz (Germany, 1790)
Rapunzel
Brier-Rose
Persinette by Charlotte-Rose de la Force (France, 1698)
Baba Yaga and the Stepdaughter
Frau Holle
Rudaba and Zal
The Book of Kings
(Persia, 11th century)
Finette Cendron by the Baroness d'Aulnoy (France, 1697)
The Magic Table, the Golden Donkey and the Club in the Sack
Madame L'Héritier (France, 1690s)
The Two Little Pizzas (two sisters: one good, one bad)
Sun, Moon and Thalia (finger-pricked princess sleeps in a forest castle)
Petrosinella (long-haired girl in a witch's tower)
The Ogre (fool loses magic devices, gets them back)
Cenerentola Cat (skivvy loses her shoe at a ball)
Aschenputtchen
The Three Fairies (good sister, bad stepsister)
Hansel and Gretel
The Enchantments of Eloquence
Cagliuso (the wily cat)
The Golden Trunk (girl tormented for curiosity until she's reunited with her beloved)
Giambattista Basile
The Tale of Tales
(Naples, 1634–6)
Nennillo and Nennella (brother and sister left in the woods after a trail is gobbled up)
The Maiden Without Hands
The Discreet Princess
All-Kinds-of-Fur
Penta with the Chopped-Off Hands (maiden loses hands and is shipped off)
King Thrushbeard
Straparola's Facetious Nights
(Venice, 1550–5)
The She-Bear (girl escapes incestuous father and hides in the forest)
Pride Punished (princess humbled by a king disguised as a peasant)
Constantino il Fortunato
The Three Citrons (maiden emerges out of magic fruit)
Sapia Liccarda (abandoned wife arranges matters so her husband impregnates her three times)
Faithful Johannes
The Crow (man becomes a statue to prove his innocence)
Tebaldo e Doralice
Perceforest (France, 14th century)
The Goblins of Kernosy Castle
The Five Sons (brothers and their father, an ogre, squabble over who gets the trophy wife)
Legend of St Dymphna (7th century) (her father wanted to marry her)
Countess de Murat (France, c.1710)
The Ocean of the Streams of Story (India, 11th century)
Yeh-Shen (China, 9th century)

Figure 1: A supernova of storytelling: how The Tale of Tales *links up with other stories from around the world.*

And so our first fairy teller walks into the shadows, never quite catching his due. '*Abbatutis*', 'the dejected one'. He rarely received it in life, would he have expected any better in death? To quote the last words of the *Tales*: 'I left, one foot after the other, with a little spoon of honey.'

Still, when it comes to the versions of the stories he wrote, at least his name is on the cover. In that respect, fate has been kinder to Giambattista than it has to our next fairy teller, who more than any of the others lived the up-and-down picaresque life of his stories.

His name was Hanna Dyab, and this is how his tale goes . . .

PART TWO

An Accidental Storyteller

The third prince, who had also indicated his desire to travel, but who had a more open, more lively and more penetrating mind than those of his two elder brothers, understood quite well that it would be the means to be detained should he ask for permission to depart. He dissimulated, very secretly made his preparations and left.

from ‘The City of Gold’, told by Hanna Dyab to Antoine Galland, 15 May 1709

The Tale of Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp

In a city in China lives a tailor’s son who is known only for his extraordinary laziness. One day, Aladdin’s widowed mother is visited by a man who claims to be her brother-in-law. In reality, he’s a sorcerer from Africa, but he takes Aladdin under his wing and leads him on an expedition to a cave, where he tells him to search for a lamp. But when the boy grows suspicious and holds back the lamp, the sorcerer’s temper snaps.

Sealed inside the cave, with no hope of survival, Aladdin casually rubs a ring he’s found on the ground. A genie (djinn) appears, and whisks him back home. Fortunately, he’s held on to the lamp, which he leaves in his mother’s care. Noting how filthy it is, she sets about rubbing it clean, only to leap back when a genie bursts out of the spout. Bigger and more powerful than the genie of the ring, this one pledges to fulfil Aladdin’s every desire. He starts off by feeding up the boy and his mother with silver platters of delicious food, then presents Aladdin with golden bowls of precious gems.

With his new-found wealth, Aladdin discovers a sense of purpose. He learns the ways of the market before setting his sights on Princess Badroulboudour, the beautiful daughter of the Sultan, glimpsed when she lifted her veil on the threshold of a bathhouse. Unfortunately, she’s already been promised to the son of the vizier. But the genie can deal with that – on the night of her wedding, he ferries the princess’s marriage bed over to Aladdin’s house and dumps her groom in the toilet. When the genie conjures a magnificent palace for his master, bang next to the Sultan’s, the ruler decides he’s found his perfect son-in-law. The vizier’s son is dismissed and Aladdin becomes prince of the realm.

Not that his happiness lasts long. The African sorcerer returns, disguised as a merchant trading new lamps for old, and offers Badroulboudour to swap her husband’s antique knick-knack for a swankier model. As soon as he has the lamp, he forces the genie to transport the palace to Africa, where he attempts to impose his will on the princess.

Alas for Aladdin! He's lost his wife and his life is under threat too – the furious Sultan has sentenced him to die. Only his popularity with the people saves him. Helped by the genie of the ring, he tracks down the princess and gives her a drug to sprinkle in the sorcerer's wine. Once his nemesis is stupefied, he slays him with his sword, steals back the lamp and commands the genie to courier the palace back to China, where the returning couple are greeted with a cavalcade of celebrations.*

* And still the tale continues . . . In the original version, the sorcerer's brother sets out to China intent on revenge. Disguising himself as a female mystic he has murdered, he weasels his way into Aladdin's palace and offers to heal the prince when he complains of a headache. But Aladdin has been warned by the genie: just as the sorcerer is about to slay him, he grabs his dagger and plunges it into his heart.

Chapter 4

Hanna Dyab

Seventy years after Giambattista Basile was murdered by a volcano, western Europe was gripped by a fever: magic tales were bleeding out of its bookshops, taking hold of readers from Avignon to Aberdeen. Some of these stories were related to the tales Giambattista had spun. But the craze that swept across the West in the early eighteenth century was driven by imaginations from the other side of the Mediterranean.

Genies and treasure caves, cities of sumptuous palaces and bustling markets, sorcerers disguised as wandering dervishes, cunning slave-girls outwitting thieves and cross-dressing princesses defeating viziers at chess: these were the tales pouring out of Europe's fledgling bookshops. So it was perfect timing for a traveller from Syria to arrive in Paris with a heap of tales in his head. His name was 'Abd al-Qari Antoun Youssef Youhenna Dyab – or Hanna for short – and he landed in the West like a rusty old oil lamp: modest on the surface, but harbouring magic.

By the time Hanna reached Paris, in the autumn of 1708, *The Thousand and One Nights*[FN1] had already become the literary phenomenon of the age. A French scholar called Antoine Galland had translated several volumes of these traditional tales, establishing himself as the West's pre-eminent interpreter of tales from the East. But it was the stories Hanna narrated to Galland between March and June 1709 that would prove the most enduring. Amongst these were 'Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp', 'Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves' and 'The Ebony Horse'.

Hanna had no inkling of what he'd done. Decades later, he wrote about his adventures in a *Book of Travels*, which was unknown until it was discovered by a manuscript researcher in the Vatican Archives.[FN2] In the process, Hanna gave us an illuminating picture of a storyteller's formation, and an adventure every bit as thrilling as the 'wonder tales' he

narrated to Galland in the Parisian apartment of the man in whom he mistakenly placed his hopes of prosperity . . .

Tête-à-Tête with a Tomb Raider

If he hadn’t been considering a vocation as a monk, Hanna might never have become a storyteller. In his late teens he was accepted as a novice in a monastery on Mount Lebanon, but doubts were creeping in. Sitting in the refectory, looking at the skulls displayed on shelves and listening to a grisly recitation on martyrdom, Hanna was barely able to eat his lentil soup. When the superior ridiculed an elderly novice, ‘like a poet launching a satire’, and gave him a kicking – to test his humility – Hanna was appalled. And he wasn’t too keen on the thick coat and rope belt he had to wear, which made him look, as he put it, ‘like a vendor of citrus fruits’.

Turning his back on the monastery, he decided to make his career in the Aleppo souk, like his elder brothers. But three months swam by without any prospects turning up, so he reluctantly decided to return to the monastery. He was eighteen years old, without a path in life, maybe not as incorrigible as Aladdin at the opening of his celebrated tale but similarly lacking direction. What he needed was some powerful guru to set him on his path. Aladdin’s comes in the form of an African sorcerer, driven by greed and power-lust. At least on the surface, Hanna’s was more benevolent.

Rain was crashing down on the fateful day in February 1707 when the Syrian teenager joined the caravan out of Aleppo: soaking the saddles, dribbling down the passengers’ turbans. Most of the baggage had been sent ahead, so the riders moved at a lick, kicking the flanks of their horses and mules, and when they arrived at the muleteer’s house in the village of Keftine, they nestled around a warm fire to dry themselves.

Hanna was planning to stick with the caravan as far as Tripoli, then pick up any transport going towards the monastery. But chance put him in the way of an unlikely travelling companion: a Frenchman in his forties called Paul Lucas, who’d carved out a lucrative niche collecting oriental antiquities for the court of King Louis XIV. A man of exceptional talent, Lucas was ‘extremely able in medical science’, reported Hanna,

‘. . . expert in the science of stars, in architecture and philosophy, in the science of nature and in that of physiognomy’.

Less so in linguistics: despite his long residence in the region, Lucas was struggling to communicate with the muleteer. So Hanna stepped in to translate. Grateful for his help, the Frenchman invited him to share his dinner and plied him with tobacco. Hanna was reluctant to disclose his plan to return to the monastery, so when Lucas asked where he was heading, he said he wanted ‘to explore the world’. And with this auspicious untruth, he sealed his fate.

‘If you come with me,’ the Frenchman pledged, ‘I will establish you at the library of Arabic books [in Paris], and you will be appointed by the king and will live all your life under his protection. The minister has charged me to bring back from these lands a man who can read Arabic . . . Do you want to come with me?’

What other answer could a talented but directionless youth give? Established as the Frenchman’s dragoman, translating and negotiating on his behalf, Hanna followed his new master on their first adventure. A few miles out of Keftine, beyond the red, stoneless soil where, according to the English traveller Henry Maundrell (who visited a decade earlier), ‘there runs along for many miles together a high ridge of hills, discovering nothing but vast naked rocks’, they embarked on a treasure hunt. What they found is particularly eye-opening, considering the famous tale that Hanna would later narrate.

According to Maundrell, there were ‘many ruins of churches and convents still to be seen in the neighbouring rocky mountains’. It was amongst this rubble that Lucas’s party found a tomb cave with a narrow breach. They had brought some guards, to fend off bandits, but none would dare enter the cave, for fear of wild beasts. So the Frenchman paid a passing goatherd: ‘Go around the tomb and give me everything you find.’ As well as a pair of human skulls, the herdsman discovered a rusty ring and a butter merchant’s lamp. Mere knick-knacks they might have been to Lucas, but for Hanna they were significant enough to describe the incident in detail, early in his account. A cave with a ring and a lamp, a local pauper dispatched by the all-knowing foreign adventurer: to readers of ‘Aladdin’, this incident has an eerie resonance.

The *Book of Travels* was written when Hanna was in his seventies, and he cautions the reader against taking him at his word: ‘Does everything

that I have seen and heard come back accurately in my memory? Certainly not!' Or, as the Arabian tales begin: 'there was and there was not'. Throughout his account, we are under the spell of an instinctive storyteller. There are sea storms and pirate attacks, miracles and technological wonders, strange creatures and celebrities, and the histories of people he meets along the way, such as a Syrian beggar who rose to prosperity as a Parisian coffee shop entrepreneur, or an impoverished Ottoman envoy stripped naked by pirates. Often, these digressions split the narrative when Hanna's own fortune is at stake, suggesting we're in the hands of a seasoned raconteur. But Hanna never overdoes it. If you're curious to know what it was like to cross the high seas and travel in the eighteenth century, ditch *Gulliver's Travels* or *Robinson Crusoe*, and grab hold of Hanna Dyab's *Book of Travels*.[FN3]

At its heart is an appealing, multi-layered narrator. Hanna comes across as a little naive, prone to anxiety – the kind of youth who faints on a ship when a tempest is brewing, who trembles with fear when he's questioned by French officers. But he's no coward. Brimming with compassion, he spoke out against injustice, asking a priest on a French galley why the oarsmen (who turned out to be convicts) were treated so wretchedly, or upbraiding a French princess for mocking an Ottoman diplomat's beard. There is a disarming openness about the narrator, rare in travel accounts of the period.

Or another way of putting it: he was easy prey from the get-go.

City of Storytellers

Hanna left vivid descriptions of the places he visited. But his home town, which bookends his memoir, is barely sketched. Only when he reached Lyon, more than a year into his travels, did he manage to convey something of its grandeur: 'This magnificent town is nearly as important and extensive,' he wrote, 'as the city of Aleppo.' If we're to understand the place that raised him, we need to delve into other accounts.

Among the fullest, from the mid eighteenth century (so contemporary with Hanna's *Book of Travels*), was the *Natural History of Aleppo* by the Scottish physician Alexander Russell. 'The mosques, the minarets, and numerous cupolas, form a splendid spectacle,' wrote the Scotsman; 'and

the flat roofs of the houses which are situated on the hills, rising one behind another, present a succession of hanging terraces, interspersed with cyprus [*sic*] and poplar trees. Towering above all, on a situation to command the whole, stands the castle, which from that distance seems to have some claim to respect.'

The same vision was available to any visitor until recent times – a labyrinth of limestone and basalt a few miles east of the Orontes Valley, squiggling around an enormous citadel built over the ruins of a temple to a Bronze Age storm god. However, as Russell recorded,

> the ideas of splendour, suggested by a distant prospect of the city, usually subside upon entering the gates. The streets, on account of the high stone walls on each hand, appear gloomy, and more narrow than they really are; some even containing the best private houses, seem little better than alleys winding among the melancholy walls of nunneries, for a few high windows guarded with lattices are only visible, and silence and solitude reign over all.

The iron-gated citadel may have been the chief landmark, but in order to measure the pulse of the city, you needed to step into the souk. Above the heads of the traders, Aleppo flashed its extravagant history in a series of architectural dioramas – the dark and light stripes of ablaq brickwork curving around the archway of an Ottoman khan, opposite the muqarnas moulding shimmering from a Mamluk portal, through which you could look upon the bevelled voussoirs of a madrasa from the time of the Crusaders' nemesis Saladin. The souk was

> of rare beauty, with large markets arranged in long adjacent rows so that you pass from a row of shops of one craft into that of another until you have gone through all the urban industries. These markets are all roofed with wood, so that their occupants enjoy an ample shade, and all hold the gaze from their beauty, and halt in wonder those who are hurrying by.

So wrote the twelfth-century Andalusian, Ibn Jubayr, and a somewhat later travel writer would concur (this one, with a strangely similar name: Jubber, N; my abiding memories are of sunlight fingering through the market's lattice-wood ceiling, spotlighting the vendors like actors ready for a scene; of sacks of golden turmeric, piles of kilim rugs and towers of Chinese shoes; and of the laughter rippling over the sloshing of tiny china coffee cups when I found myself in the vendors' back rooms, listening to their tales).

To wander those covered alleys was to be admitted into the world that Hanna knew, an experience available to any visitor until the bomb-fall gutted this tragic city in 2012 (I made it there a decade earlier, passing through on a journey across the Levant). Aleppo was a crossroads, drawing in Kurds from the mountains and Bedouin from the desert, Persians from the nearby Safavid Empire, Ottoman officials from Constantinople, Jews, Cypriots and Armenians, not to mention all the international merchants; 'an Epitome of the whole world', as the seventeenth-century Englishman Charles Robson called it, 'there scarce being a Nation . . . who hath not some trading here or thither'.

But trading was for the daytime. Once the shutters had been pulled over the shopfronts, and padlocks installed, it was time to indulge in Aleppo's favourite pastime: to venture into the coffee houses. There you could hear musicians or watch the shadow puppet shows, revolving around the stock comic character of Karagöz, a pot-bellied merchant not unlike the Italian Pulcinella. Best of all were the storytellers, who drew on their capacity to remember long, complicated narratives. Hanging out in the coffee houses was an excellent training for a storyteller, for 'by combining the incidents of different tales, and varying the catastrophe of such as he has related before', according to Russell, the storyteller

> gives them an air of novelty even to persons who at first imagine they are listening to tales with which they are acquainted . . . He is commonly heard with great attention and, not infrequently, in the midst of some interesting adventure, when the expectation of his audience is raised to the highest pitch, he breaks off abruptly, and makes his escape from the room . . . and the auditors, suspending their curiosity, are induced to return at the same hour next day, to hear the sequel.

It's the classic template, so successful that TV serials use it today, and *The Thousand and One Nights* was one of its pioneers. In the famous frame tale, the vizier's daughter Scheherazade holds off the executioner's blade by pausing her storytelling at key moments in the narrative, compelling King Shahriyar to spare her for another night, so eager is he to hear how the tale plays out. In the process, Scheherazade presents us with the stock technique of long-form storytelling: the cliffhanger.

A city of storytellers – *hakawatis*, as they were called. It was certainly good hunting ground for story-seekers (as the English scholar Edward Pococke discovered, amassing a library of more than six hundred manuscripts when he was based there in the 1630s), and we know that

magical tales existed in Aleppo in Hanna's day, because when the French scholar Antoine Galland was shifting around for a copy, it was from Aleppo that the manuscript was sent.[FN4] So it was the Aleppo version that became the standard form of these tales in the West. And there were other tales that Galland would receive from Aleppo, not from a book but from a son of the city: Hanna Dyab.

Exit West

To travel between the eighteenth-century Levant and Europe was to witness a world swinging between ancient superstitions and the fruits of the 'Age of Science', a world singeing itself with Counter-Reformation and the burning of witches whilst it wrestled with the laws of gravity and the invention of the steam pump. In Beirut, Hanna visited 'the grotto of the dragon which Saint George killed'. In Italy he heard about a woman who had risen from the dead after being entombed. When he fell ill in Italy, an old man gave him some distilled water in 'a crystal bottle' that not only cured his fever but spared him from ever contracting fever again. Or so he believed, parcelling out credit for his recovery between the old man's craft and his prayers to the Virgin Mary. But he also marvelled at the astronomical clock of Lyons, the cisterns of Alexandria and the hydraulic engineering of Versailles.

Ajaib – 'wonder': an Arabic word linked with magical tales as well as the marvels seen by travellers. But wonders didn't have a monopoly, and they had to muck in with more sordid realities. Near Corsica, Hanna's ship was boarded by pirates (partly because the captain was too busy depositing his treasures in an escape canoe). The passengers' goods were taken, including ancient coins, medals and six dozen tarbooshes belonging to Lucas. The explorer appealed to the pirates' sense of national loyalty – for these weren't just any old pirates; they were French. 'Do you not know that I have been sent by the King of France on a voyage of exploration?' exclaimed Lucas, displaying his royal licence. But the pirate captain had little respect for such formalities. 'I'm the king on my ship,' he crowed, adding scornfully, 'go soak your licence in the water.'

On arrival at the port of Livorno, however, Lucas turned the tables. Flashing documents of registration and royal licences, he warned the

consul he'd have to answer to the king if his property wasn't recovered. The pirate captain was arrested, Lucas's property returned, and he had the satisfaction of giving his nemesis a magnanimous pardon. A clash of cultures resounds through this episode: buccaneering versus bureaucracy (which includes the fumigation of Lucas's documents for hygienic purposes). On this occasion, it's bureaucracy that wins.

Enlightenment France may have seen itself as the last word in civilisation, but its visitor wasn't always impressed. Hanna was horrified when a barber shaved off his moustache, and he wasn't too sure about all the women in the streets, 'selling and buying as if they were men'. And as for the awkward matter of going to the toilet . . .

Bursting for a pee when he arrived in Marseilles, Hanna asked the staff at the Hôtel du Petit Paris where he might go. How about looking under his bed, one of them suggested. But when he found a chamber pot there, he couldn't bring himself to use it (and the idea of hurling its contents out of the window appalled him), so he strolled to a nearby park to answer the call of nature.[FN5]

This was hardly the only instance in which Hanna was confounded by the strange practices of Europeans. The sight of galley convicts, heavily bruised by soldiers' blackjacks, disturbed him; in Paris he accosted a police officer who'd struck a one-legged soldier for begging outside a church (the officer insisted that veterans received an adequate pension, but for Hanna, coming from the ready alms-giving of the Islamic world, the treatment seemed harsh); and a terrible famine ripped through France while he was there, eventually relieved by wheat from the Maghreb.

Reading Hanna's account is to be reminded that, while the West was in the ascendant, the geopolitical tectonic plates were still within touching distance. In living memory, the Ottoman Empire had appeared to threaten the existence of Mitteleuropa (it was only a few years before Hanna's birth, in 1683, that Ottoman sappers were burrowing under the walls of Vienna and premature obituaries were being written for the Habsburg Empire). Hanna was travelling at the moment when the West was pulling ahead. And on arriving in Paris, he would experience the sharpest edge of this power dynamic. For Lucas intended to present him to his master – the self-proclaimed King of the World.

A Palace Conjured by a Genie

Fancy a twirl around Aladdin's palace? If you live in northern Europe, you can go there on a day trip. Take the train to Gare du Nord, then an RER fifty minutes south-west. Out with the crowd, down an avenue nearly a hundred metres wide, between cycle lanes and enfilades of plane trees. They're packed so tight, it's as if they've been planted to shield you from the glare. Because blazing at the end of the boulevard is 'a palace without equal on all the continents', as Hanna called it.

On approaching the palace, you would see 'a solid and luxurious building', he tells us, 'on which the roofs were covered in black stone . . . The tops of the chimneys are gilded. When the sun alights on them, they shine so much that one cannot look upon their brightness.'

Inside this fairy tale seraglio, enchantments bombard you from every side. One grand hall follows another, the painted ceilings corbelled in stucco and gilt, the windows smothered in brocade curtains. Your reflection stares back, brilliantly lit, from a hall of mirrors, showing you glimpses of the precision-trimmed hedges and elaborate fountains in the gardens, where water spouts from the heads of mythical beasts. Statecraft and pleasure are mingled, making it hard to distinguish one from the other as the guiding principle behind the architects' designs. Wading amongst the splendour, you can almost see the viziers and boon-companions, concubines and slaves who passed along these corridors; as you stop under a painting showing turbaned courtiers plucking flowers and holding the arms of veiled ladies, or a black youth attending a queen, or the 'Sultan' (as Hanna called the palace's owner) receiving a tribute of peacock feathers and ostrich eggs. But this 'palace without equal' is no Arabian alcazar. It's the great French chateau of Versailles, which scholars have identified as a model for the 'wonder of the world' conjured by Aladdin's genie in the tale.[FN6]

In his awe of Versailles, Hanna was hardly alone. When the Tunisian ambassador Yusuf Khujah visited, he asked for engravings of the palace, fearing his descriptions would fail to do justice to its wonders. In light of the tales that Hanna narrated, the account of the British chaplain Dr Jeans (who visited in 1775) is fitting: 'All the accounts which I had formerly read in the "Thousand and One Nights" of the palaces of the genii under

the sea fall short in their descriptions to the reality which here presented itself to my view.'

Wearing his traditional Syrian clothes – baggy red trousers with a silver dagger tucked inside his belt, a red-brown overshirt, a fur cap and a turban – Hanna stood out among the periwigged courtiers with their corkscrew curls and ribbons, like an ostrich stranded in a flamingo colony. In case his flamboyant get-up wasn't enough, Hanna was also carrying a cage with two jerboas from Tunisia – desert rodents the height of small rabbits (as far as Hanna was concerned, their tails were like lions' and their muzzles like pigs' – his description brings to mind some strange beast in a tale). This was exactly the kind of curiosity King Louis relished. His son, the Dauphin, had a board on which all the known animals of the world were drawn. But there was no record of the jerboas, so the royal physician was summoned. Even this august figure had to admit he'd never set eyes on such creatures, which meant that Paul Lucas could claim the credit for presenting a genuine novelty. At the very beginning of their visit, they'd scored a hit.

Curiously, this episode is echoed in a painting in one of the palace's state rooms. In the Hall of Mercury, a scene mounted in a ceiling mould shows four minders carrying a crocodile, balanced on wooden poles. At a claw-footed table the philosopher Aristotle is scribbling down a description of the creature on a parchment. Another painting shows the presentation of a leopard by a bare-chested bearer. The animals are being brought in tribute to Alexander the Great, but the association is clear: only among the classical greats can the Sun King find his peers.

Exotic animals were popular diplomatic gifts (the King of Portugal wowed Louis in 1668 with an African elephant, and in the 1680s ambassadors from Siam were accompanied by three crocodiles). Paul Lucas knew exactly what he was doing when he instructed Hanna, only a few days into their acquaintance, to arrange for the couriering of his traditional costume; and when he commissioned a special cage for the jerboas.

All over Versailles, these lion-tailed rodents were in demand, and so was their keeper. During his eight-day stay, Hanna was presented in the chambers of various princesses, with or without the jerboas. In one chamber the famously charming Duchess of Burgundy (mother of the future King Louis XV) was playing cards. Setting their game aside, the

court ladies inspected the creatures, then turned their attention on the carrier. Sections of Hanna's costume were lifted, the fabric touched, jokes exchanged about his moustache. In another chamber, a gathering of princesses gazed upon Hanna, and he found himself in trouble for correcting a lady-in-waiting who pointed out the 'sabre' in his belt. Hanna insisted it was a 'dagger', prompting a furious chiding from Lucas, since daggers were forbidden at Versailles – the punishment could be enslavement on a galley ship.

These scenes make for uncomfortable reading, but what is refreshing is that we're seeing them through the eyes of a young Syrian. The French princesses may have been inspecting Hanna, but he was looking straight back. He describes the Duchess of Burgundy's entourage, 'as beautiful as stars, dressed in precious costumes of gold brocaded silk', their beauty eclipsed by the duchess herself; and another princess in a silk coat coiffed in a diadem with precious stones, diamonds, hyacinths and emeralds, 'which ravished the eye'. He uses the imagery of stars to describe these attendants, and tends to identify the highest-ranking princess in any circle as the most beautiful, conforming to a pattern repeated in his tales. Like any coffee house *hakawati*, he was building his own story-world: a picaresque adventure, with himself as the unlikely hero, surviving sea storms, life-threatening fever and pirates, and spinning around the most magical palace in the world.

And what a story it was! Here was the directionless youth from the Aleppo souk, educating the Sun King in African fauna, submitting himself to the fingers of curious princesses. Whether Hanna consciously connected himself with heroes like Aladdin, one can imagine the zest with which he narrated his stories about the rise of humbly born heroes, imaginatively immersing himself in the mirror images of their tales. But winning your fortune, as his tales often show, is the easy part. It was when he'd made it, when he was living in Paul Lucas's magnificent Paris apartment as the explorer's protégé, that things would start to get complicated.

The Tale of a Slave-Girl’s Stratagems

A poor lumberjack called Hogia (Ali) Baba is collecting firewood when a rapidly moving cloud of dust sends him scurrying up a tree. From his hiding place he sees a gang of thieves approaching a cave. ‘Open Sesame,’ declares their leader, and a magic door slides open. As soon as they’ve left, Ali Baba repeats this phrase. Inside the cave he discovers an amazing store of treasure, and piles as much as he can manage onto his donkeys. But when he borrows his brother Kasim’s weighing pan to measure his gains, he inadvertently gives away the source of his fortune.

More bullish than Ali Baba, Kasim wants a share, but he forgets the password as soon as he’s inside the cave. ‘Open barley’ won’t force an exit, nor will ‘open lentil’. He’s still trying to remember the code when the thieves return, brandishing their swords.

Discovering his brother’s quartered corpse, Ali Baba brings it back home. He sends out Kasim’s slave Morgiana, who asks for medicine in the bazaar (to spread word that Kasim has been unwell) and pays a blindfolded cobbler to come back to the house and sew up the corpse. So Ali Baba’s brother is buried, as if he’d died of natural causes.

But the thieves are on to them. They bribe the cobbler, who despite the blindfold remembers the way to Ali Baba’s house. They mark it with chalk, first white then red, but Morgiana scores other houses in the neighbourhood to befuddle them. Eventually, memory is enough: the chief of the thieves bribes the cobbler again, studies Ali Baba’s house-front, and turns up with thirty-seven leather oil vessels, claiming to be a merchant in need of lodging.

Unwittingly, Ali Baba offers his hospitality, and has the oil vessels deposited in his cellar. The thieves are hiding inside (except for two, locked up by their chief for incompetence), awaiting the signal. But when Morgiana overhears them muttering inside the vessels, she mimics the leader’s voice, boils up the oil with tar and pours it into the jars.

Only the chief escapes. Thirsting for revenge, he hires a shop, befriends Ali Baba’s son, and has himself invited back for dinner. When he asks not

to be fed salt – the symbol of hospitality – Morgiana's suspicion is aroused. Dressing as a dancer with a ceremonial dagger, she swings around the room, and at the height of her dance she stabs the chief. But he was an honoured guest, Ali Baba protests, until she reveals the knife hidden under the thief's gown. So grateful is Ali Baba that he frees Morgiana and marries her to his son, and they all live in prosperity until the end of their days.

Chapter 5

Paris is the World

‘Ah! What to say of the city of Paris,’ wrote Hanna, ‘of its extent and immensity.’ Brilliantly lit, unobscured by the heavy ramparts that darkened the visitor’s approach to so many cities, it was as mighty a wonder as Versailles.

Hanna marvelled at the system of lighting, with lanterns fixed to every building, maintained by the house owners, who were obliged to sweep in front of their doors within an hour of dawn, and the refuse carts that roamed the streets. He admired the ‘excellent organisation of the hospital’ and the range of studies offered by the academic institutions – ‘one finds in the city of Paris schools for all the sciences and all the arts which exist in the entire world’. He relished the theatrical performances, in which the Harlequin reminded him of the Levantine shadow play anti-hero, Karagöz. And he was awestruck by the religious festivals, such as a Corpus Christi procession at which priests in gold-embroidered chasubles carried golden crucifixes and the cardinal displayed a monstrance so brightly encrusted with diamonds, emeralds and other precious stones that ‘it ravished the eyes’.

‘Paris, it’s the world,’ declares a character in a 1734 play by Pierre de Marivaux, ‘the rest of the earth is nothing but its suburbs’. But, as with Giambattista Basile’s Naples, marvels were cheek-by-jowl with muck. Over time, Hanna began to notice that ‘in this city there are a lot of sinful girls, their houses signalled by a large bouquet of thistles hung above the door’. He witnessed executions and other punishments, and although he was hardly unfamiliar with public brutality, he was still shocked by some of the Parisian methods. When a female pimp was bound to a refuse cart, whipped twelve times and dragged, barefoot and naked to the waist, he bemoaned this ‘detestable spectacle, what a supreme shame for the female gender’.

Even worse than the wheels of justice was the weather. Hanna was unlucky to be in Paris during the ‘Great Frost’ of 1709, when temperatures plummeted to minus five degrees Fahrenheit. ‘Never in my life have I seen a winter such as this one,’ wrote the Duchess of Orléans, one of the noblewomen Hanna may have encountered in Versailles, ‘which freezes the wine in bottles.’ It was somewhat more inconvenient for the poor, as Hanna noticed: ‘mothers were found dead with their children in their beds, men and women bound in each other’s arms’, and the corpses of rural migrants were dragged out of the stables.

Just how dangerous this frost had become, Hanna discovered for himself on a visit to the barber’s: ‘I became like a statue, the frost made the hairs fall off my moustache and I believed I would die.’ His arms were too stiff for him to undress himself, so Lucas’s servants tore off his clothes, smeared him in eagle fat, placed him beside a fire and wrapped him in several heated blankets. To make matters worse, the cold was followed by a famine, which was only relieved by the importation of large quantities of wheat from North Africa – showing the Sun King wasn’t as supreme over the world as his propagandists liked to claim. ‘In this time,’ Hanna recalled, ‘my soul was choked; I couldn’t bear to live in these lands any more.’

Tell Me Your Tales

Appropriately or not, Paul Lucas’s apartment was an Ali Baba’s cave of oriental treasures. Its contents included a ten-foot-high sculpture of the Roman goddess Ceres, a Jerusalem cross decorated with mother-of-pearl, seven hundred medicinal bottles, a marble bust of Scipio, a bronze Diana, an embalmed Egyptian Ibis, an alabaster Adam and Eve, figures of Japanese porcelain, rhinoceros horns, the pelts of lions and tigers, and a camel’s muzzle damascened in silver. No wonder so many visitors turned up. Lucas may have been collecting for the king, but he was able to hold on to the bulk of his specimens, establishing a ‘cabinet of curiosities’ that attracted the city’s growing population of orientalists.

Amongst these was the translator of the *Nights*, Antoine Galland, who recorded in his diary on 17 March 1709: ‘I went this morning to the home of Monsieur Paul Lucas to report to him about the medals which he had

entrusted with me eight days ago. I spent some time with Hanna, a Maronite from Aleppo who, other than his language, which is Arabic, speaks Provençal and French, quite passably.' There is no mention of stories in this brief account. Nor on the following day, when Galland was shown a dolphin made out of agate along with 'a carnelian of a reasonable size'. But a week later the scholar turned up when Lucas was on the point of leaving. 'I stopped with Mr Hanna,' he wrote, 'the Maronite of Aleppo, who has come from Aleppo, and Mr Hanna told me some Arab tales, extremely beautiful, which he promised to communicate to me in writing.'

It was a remarkable alignment of the stars. By 1709 Galland had already published seven volumes of his translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*, and the eighth appeared that year. But his readership was unsated and his publisher was pressing for more.

From early May to 2 June 1709 Hanna narrated sixteen tales to Galland. Although the French scholar was impressed, he took some time to work out how to use them. It was a year and a half later, on 3 November 1710, that he recorded in his diary: 'From yesterday, I have started to write the Arabic tale of the lamp, which was written for me in Arabic nearly a year before by the Maronite of Damascus, who Mr Lucas brought with him, with the intention to put it into French . . . I will begin this evening writing down something of this tale.'

The story narrated by Hanna wasn't short. It took more than a single sitting to read it, and two months to complete the translation. Galland did much to colour in the details, but it was Hanna who provided the characters, the twists in the tale, the settings and resolution. 'Aladdin' is a collaboration between Hanna's recitation and Galland's literary recreation. But Hanna deserves credit as the earliest known teller of this beloved tale.

It was a role underplayed from the outset by Galland. In his 3 November diary entry logging his reading of the tale, he omitted Hanna's name and mistook his location – he was from Aleppo, not Damascus, as the Frenchman acknowledged in an earlier diary entry. Nearly ten weeks later, on 10 January 1711, Galland wrote: 'I finished the translation of the 10th volume of the 1001 Nights, after the Arabic text that I had from the hand of Hanna or Jean Dipy, who Monsieur Lucas brought with him to France on his return from his last journey to the Levant.'

'Jean Dipy' was the name of another Syrian Maronite in Paris. This shows how easily Galland was able to obscure the original teller's identity.

Although he annotated the tales with explicatory notes, he chose not to include the name of the teller. The result was that for nearly three centuries the authorship of ‘Aladdin’ and more than a dozen other stories was barely known. Only in recent years, following the discovery of Hanna’s *Book of Travel*s, has the teller begun to emerge. But in order to understand why Galland suppressed Hanna’s role, we need to look a little closer at the man who made the *Nights* into the storytelling phenomenon of the Age of Enlightenment.

The Poor Boy from the Provinces

In the tiny village of Rollot, in the department of the Somme, a bronze periwigged Antoine Galland looks down on the passers-by. An inscription on the stone pedestal commemorates him as an ‘orientalist and numismatist, antiquarian to the king, member of the academy of inscriptions, translator of the Arabic tales of the 1001 Nights’. On the other side of the pedestal, a bas-relief shows Galland, in a flowing wig and breeches, sitting beside an unidentified figure in a turban and baggy trousers.

The memorial has quite a history – it was destroyed by German soldiers during the First World War, rebuilt and then hidden in the Second World War when the mayor caught on to a plan to requisition the bronze for munitions. So important was Galland’s achievement for local self-esteem that the mayor hid the bust until the end of the war. This pride reflects Galland’s achievement as the architect behind the *Nights*’ international fame, although it wasn’t his expectation when he began his translation.

What the bust’s grandeur conceals is the unpromising background that Galland so tenaciously overcame. The youngest of seven children, in a family that could barely scrape a meal together, he appeared destined for a church career. But his fierce intelligence pulled him through the Collège Royal and brought him to the attention of the elite. In 1670 he was dispatched on a diplomatic mission to the Ottoman court in Constantinople, serving the French ambassador, the Marquis de Nointel. Although they managed a Levantine tour, and even made it to Jerusalem, the marquis’s indulgences (which included building a hall of mirrors at the embassy and squabbling with the Grand Vizier over seating arrangements

at a diplomatic confab) cut the stay short. But Galland returned to Constantinople on two further occasions, one of them lasting for nearly a decade.

Wandering around the Ottoman capital gave him plenty of opportunities to experience local storytelling, in coffee house recitals and the bookshops of the *bezestan* market. On his return to Paris, he produced a translation from a Turkish version of the Indian animal fables known as *Kalila and Dimna* (published in 1696) and the tales of 'Sindbad the Sailor', which he finished in 1698, under the sponsorship of 'Madame d'O', a lady-in-waiting and daughter of a former ambassador to Constantinople (a shrewd choice of patron for an ambitious scribe, since she was familiar with the East and known to be 'very clever in intrigue', according to a contemporary observer).

Galland's version of Sindbad wasn't its first European outing: a Spanish version had circulated as early as the thirteenth century. But it was the Frenchman who linked these tales to a larger collection, and who asked an Arab friend to ferret out a copy. 'Three or four days ago,' he wrote in October 1701, 'a friend from Aleppo residing in Paris informed me by letter that he has received from his country a book in Arabic I had asked him to get for me. It is in three volumes, entitled . . . The Thousand Nights . . . It will be something with which to amuse myself during the long nights.' Among the contents of this fifteenth-century manuscript were 'stories just as good,' he wrote, 'as the fairy tales published these last years in such profusion'.[FN1]

The early volumes of Galland's *Nights* included many wonderful stories, such as 'The Fisherman and the Genie' and 'The City of Brass', not to mention the iconic frame tale about Scheherazade's storytelling prowess. These early volumes were instant hits: 'well received at the court,' in Galland's words, 'in Paris and in the provinces, as well by the gentlemen as by the ladies.' An anonymous English translation was produced in 1706, entitled *The Arabian Nights' Entertainment*, and was so successful that during the course of the century there would be eighty English editions, all translated from Galland.

What those early volumes didn't contain, conspicuously, were the stories most commonly associated in the West with the *Nights* today. The enduring popularity of the later tales may reflect Galland's freedom to shape Hanna's recitals (compared with the earlier volumes translated from

a fixed text), to marry them to the tastes of his European public. But this is to overlook the imaginative exuberance of Hanna's tales, captured in the summaries that Galland recorded in his diary.

From the twisty plot of 'The City of Gold', in which a prince rides a magical bird to a secret palace and solves a devious princess's riddle, to the repeated catastrophes and eventual dazzling success of 'The Poor Rope-Maker', whose life turns around when he's given a fish containing a magical jewel, even Hanna's less celebrated tales swing down surprising pathways, like pickpockets eluding their pursuers in the souk. What makes Hanna's tales so gripping is the pattern of reversals, the twists in the tales. Aladdin wins a fortune, then loses it, and has to win it all back. The hero of 'The Ebony Horse' carries his beloved back to his home, only for her to be snatched away by a vengeful sorcerer not unlike Aladdin's nemesis. Fortunes are wrenched out of the heroes' grasps, easy routes to success thwarted by bad luck or enemies' stratagems, yielding long trails of unexpected challenges. It is in this respect that we can see the skills of an instinctive storyteller among the coffee house entertainers in Aleppo, the skills noted by Alexander Russell.

Which is why Galland's meeting with Hanna counts as one of the most fruitful in literary history, giving to the West some of its favourite tales of the East. Although, for all the promises he received, the storyteller was left with a bittersweet feeling. He had travelled to Paris on the wings of Paul Lucas's pledge of employment and prosperity, but a terrible misunderstanding would puncture his ambitions, like a knife sliced through a saddle flask.

Opportunity of a Lifetime

'He promised me,' recalled Hanna of his meetings with Galland, 'in any case where I had a problem to resolve, that he would help me with all his heart. One day when we were talking, he said to me: "I want to accord you a favour, but only if you keep it secret." ' The 'old man' remained enigmatic, and it wasn't until the next day that Hanna discovered what he had in mind.

Galland took him to 'a prince, counted among the dignitaries of the state' who was looking, according to the scholar, for 'somebody to undertake a journey of exploration'. Although the prince isn't named in

Hanna's memoir, there is a clue to his identity in Galland's diary. He mentions negotiating between Hanna and the Abbé de Signy: François de Camps, a well-connected numismatist and antiquarian in his mid-sixties, although not as powerful a figure as Hanna assumed.[FN2] Impressing this 'prince' with his knowledge about 'coins and ancient figures, the books of chronicles about the ancient kings and other objects', Hanna was offered a job. He would be given a royal permit, de Camps explained, 'which will recommend you to ambassadors and consuls in the oriental countries'. He would gather antiquarian objects, and 'If you come back safe and sound,' pledged his prospective boss, 'I will elevate your position and establish you in a function that will guarantee you a significant income.'

For a young man of Hanna's background, the offer was tantalising, but weighing against it was his feeling of indebtedness to Lucas. A lack of confidence in the offer added a further constraint, although this was eroded by his own growing disillusionment with Paris. Already unsettled by the 'Great Frost', Hanna was pushed closer to the edge by another perilous incident.

Imagine you're far from home, wandering a city that amazes but often unsettles you. Suddenly your arms are seized by a pair of gendarmes. If you don't tell them where your friend's hiding, they warn, you'll be put to torture.

The friend was Youssef, a jeweller from Aleppo, charged with bigamy and absconding with the jewels of various notables. An indignant Lucas had his protégé quickly released, but 'This fright had marked me', recorded Hanna: 'I decided to quit Paris to do what the prince had commanded me to do: to journey and explore.'

If he was going to accept the role, he wanted to do it properly, so he approached his master for a discussion. But bilateral discourse wasn't exactly Lucas's métier.

'Are you not satisfied in your life with me?' the voyager exclaimed. 'I have gone to a lot of trouble for your sake and brought you to this country for your benefit.'

For a few days Hanna appeared to have been swayed. But when Galland took him to de Camps to present his apologies in person, he swung back the other way.

There's a storybook quality to these encounters: the ingénue melting against the heat of temptation; the characters stripped down to stock

functions – the ‘old man’, the ‘master’, the ‘prince’. And the ‘prince’ worked on him expertly. He encouraged Hanna to take a different approach: tell his master he’d received news from back home, a sickness in the family, obliging him to return.

Of all the people to try such a flimsy excuse with, Lucas was the worst. ‘You sons of the Orient,’ he declared, ‘you are people of little gratitude.’ No wonder he saw through it – when Youssef the Jeweller had asked Hanna for advice about his matrimonial tangles, the same ruse was suggested by Lucas. Which makes it pretty rich of him to deem it ‘oriental’ behaviour. He dismissed Hanna with a statutory payment and a warning: ‘you will repent of this later, but by then it will be of no use’.

The die had been cast. Hanna presented himself at Versailles with a letter from de Camps, but he was told he would have to wait until the following Monday for his royal licence. A little impetuously, he’d already booked his berth on the coach heading south – a lavish carriage with glass windows, drawn by eight horses – and it was leaving on the Thursday. So his patron told him to get going, and he’d send along his permit, along with letters of recommendation, as soon as they were ready.

It wasn’t the worst situation to be in: for an ex-pat Syrian itching for home, Marseilles was a more amenable setting than Paris, a city that had been looking eastwards ever since it was founded, two millennia previously, by mariners from Asia Minor. Behind the ramparts of the Fort Saint-Jean, Levantines filled the shops of La Canebière, just as Levantines filled the ships around the Quai d’Orléans. Meeting so many reminders of home reinforced Hanna’s impatience, chipping away at his appetite for the plotting of his Parisian acquaintances.

He watched the days pass by, anxiously awaiting news. Every morning he visited the post office, or asked at his inn if any messages had arrived. After two weeks of silence, he wrote to de Camps, whose reply advised him to seek out a particular individual who allegedly had the documents. But, unable to find any trace of this person, he could hold his patience no longer. After a fourth week in Marseilles, he scribbled out ‘a letter of reproach’ to de Camps: ‘how could a man of his rank, a prince, have separated me from my master and ruined my hopes, whichever way I turned?’

In Hanna’s account, he comes across as impatient, gullible, naive. Lucas, Galland, de Camps and Youssef the Jeweller all used him in

different ways. But one amongst them was the most culpable, as Hanna learned from an enigmatic figure at the inn.

‘It is the old man who you visited,’ explained this traveller, ‘who surreptitiously incited the prince to send you on a voyage.’ According to this informant, Galland had heard that Lucas was going to secure for Hanna the directorship of the library of Arabic books, a role Galland had been eyeing for years. So the scholar ‘incited’ the prince to send Hanna on a journey.

Theoretically, it could have worked out with jobs for both of them. But that’s without accounting for Lucas’s ire. On hearing that Hanna had shown up at Versailles, the explorer approached de Camps and – in a *coup de grâce* that’s not exactly inconsistent with what we know of his character – offered to undertake the mission in Hanna’s place.

For the young Arab, it was a bitter blow. Jobless and destitute, he hankered for home, but he didn’t even have enough money to pay for a berth on a ship. Thanks to a merchant who had traded in Aleppo, he was installed on a galley bound for Ottoman territory, as a non-paying guest of the captain, and slowly made his way back to Aleppo. There’s a feeling of relief about his homecoming: a storybook character stepping back through the wardrobe, returning to the cosier realm of family and friends. After all those false pledges of prosperity, he settled into the routine of the Aleppo souk and the life from which he’d run away three and a half years before.

And what about Galland? In 1706 a priest called François Martin, recording the ‘chagrin’ Galland had expressed when he was spurned for another position, wrote: ‘He hopes to have the Chair of the Arabic language.’ This was a position at the Collège Royal, connected to the court of Versailles. The incumbent was an octogenarian called Pierre Dipy, a Maronite from Aleppo whose name in Arabic was ‘Dyab’. He had held the post since 1667, and Galland was so eager to take his place that he spread malicious gossip against Dipy and kept a jealous eye over his nephew, Jean (who was interpreter of oriental languages to the king and was keen to succeed his uncle in the chair). That Galland named Hanna as Jean Dipy in one of his journal entries is revealing: individual identity melting under the heat of his preoccupation.

But let’s remember, Galland lived in a world obsessed with status. The poor seventh child of a rural family had been grinding his way up the ranks and had no intention of falling before he reached his goal. Another

Maronite from Aleppo, another ‘Dipy’, freshly arrived from the East with the backing of Paul Lucas: in a world of Macchiavellian courtiers, is it any surprise that Galland resorted to scheming? Timing was key: that very year of 1709, Pierre Dipy died and the Chair of Arabic fell vacant. At last, Galland succeeded to the role he had coveted for so long. All the time he’d been listening to Hanna’s ‘beautiful tales’, he’d never taken his eye off the prize.

The Slave’s Tale

None of Hanna’s tales reveals his world more than ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’. Unlike ‘Aladdin’, it isn’t drenched in magic – the only supernatural feature is the cave door that slides back in answer to literature’s most iconic password, ‘Open Sesame’. Otherwise, the story is about daily life in a typical Arabic city (although, like many of Hanna’s tales, it’s set further east – in this case in Persia). When the thieves are trying to find Ali Baba’s house, they mark the door with chalk, but the resourceful Morgiana is able to befuddle them by marking the neighbouring doors – evoking the nondescript house exteriors of Arab medinas, and recalling Alexander Russell’s description of eighteenth-century Aleppo.

Was Hanna’s home town in his mind when he narrated this tale? He certainly understood the story-gathering potential of shopkeeping. After all, his brothers ran the kind of draper’s shop the story describes, and on his return they would set him up as a draper himself (a function also offered to Aladdin by the evil sorcerer). And much of the plot revolves around a common feature of Middle Eastern city life: fear of what the neighbours will say. The same principle that informs the thief captain’s decision to hire the shop in the souk also drives the elaborate scheme to hide the manner of Kasim’s death – Morgiana putting it about that he’s fallen sick. This is a tale that knows people talk.

‘Aladdin’ wows us with its wonders, but the charm of ‘Ali Baba’ is earthier. The narrative is driven by the procedural logic of a crime thriller: the steps Ali Baba and Morgiana take to hush up Kasim’s death, the steps the thieves take to track them down. When the captain arrives at Ali Baba’s house, he asks not to be given any salt, pretending he has a medical

complaint. This reflects a traditional Arab belief that sharing salt binds a host and his guest. As long as he doesn't taste his host's salt, the captain still feels entitled to murder him. These are the kinds of details that make 'Ali Baba' one of the most tangible of wonder tales.

Hanna was narrating a story he had likely heard in the coffee houses of Aleppo, or amongst other storytellers in the souk. There are correspondences, as the scholar Aboubakr Chraïbi has suggested, with the Syrian folk tale known as 'The Lumberjack and the Djinn'. The djinn (genies) hide inside some packing trunks, but the lumberjack's sister-in-law burns them with pokers and calls the neighbours to drive them away. Hanna's version turns the djinn into grubby thieves (channelling his own fear, perhaps – for when he found himself in a cave off the caravan track on his journey back to Aleppo, he worried it might be 'the lair of a band of thieves'); instead of being burned they are boiled, and far from alerting the neighbours, Ali Baba and Morgiana do their best to hush everything up. This last detail has Hanna's signature all over it. He was always nervous of public attention, hiding his departure from Aleppo in case he might be held back; and on his eventual return to his home town, he would hide himself again, wary of causing a scene.

But if Hanna's preoccupations helped to shape the tale, Galland made sure to leave his mark on it. To study his diary is to scratch at the veneer laid over Hanna's storytelling. There, in the Frenchman's crabby handwriting, we see the original title of the story: '*Les finesses de Morgiane* . . .' – 'The Stratagems of Morgiana; or the Forty Thieves exterminated by the cunning of a slave'. The switch is telling. Any reader of 'Ali Baba' knows Morgiana is the true hero. Ali Baba finds the treasure, but the greater challenge is to hold on to it. This is Morgiana's work – covering up Kasim's death, overhearing the thieves' plot, executing them with oil and dispatching their leader as well. Her reward is marriage to Ali Baba's son – which is the title character's cleverest deed, ensuring he'll have this brilliant strategist around for the rest of his life.

The Thousand and One Nights contains many other tales with resourceful women – not least the frame tale about Scheherazade, who claims amnesty from the executioner's blade through her skilfully constructed storytelling, and the tale of 'The Porter and the Ladies of Baghdad', in which the women are fervently independent from the men who crumble before their nimbly deployed sexual magnetism. But Hanna's

stories are not always generous to women. They are often subjected to brutal punishments or forgotten as soon as their narrative function has been fulfilled. What is striking about his tales, however, is the range of characters propelling the plots. Sure, there are princes and princesses, but only occasionally: Hanna shows that anybody can drive a story. The way is led by rope makers and robbers, slaves and street kids, tea sellers and tree fellers. Among the many thousands of folk tales around the world, it's rare to find a story in which a female slave like Morgiana, or the child who reveals how the merchant Ali Khojia was cheated, get to stand on the hero's pedestal. In this sense, Hanna's stories share the egalitarian spirit of his *Book of Travels*. It was his misfortune that Antoine Galland and Paul Lucas, despite their many talents, did not.

The Tale of the City of Gold

Three princes are raised in a palace with crystal windows, through which the outside world cannot be seen. When one of them throws a bone against the window and it shatters, they are seized by curiosity for the world outside. A jam-selling dervish tells them about his travels, and the three princes determine to roam.

First the eldest sets out, travelling to a splendid city where he is offered the hand of a princess. All he must do is answer her riddle, but if he fails he will lose his head.

‘Where,’ the princess asks, ‘is the City of Gold?’

Unable to answer, the prince is summarily beheaded. Soon he is followed by the second prince, equally unable to answer the riddle, and finally by the youngest brother, who has a more ‘open’ and ‘lively’ mind than the others.

Before the princess poses her question, the third prince sees his brothers’ headless bodies, preserved from decay by enchantment. Undaunted, he agrees to the princess’s terms. The City of Gold? Of course he knows where it is! Or so he insists, and asks for forty days’ grace before he must give her an answer.

Riding out in search of the mysterious city, he rests under a rock and saves a batch of newly hatched rukhs – magical talking birds – from a serpent. So grateful are the parents, they offer to fulfil any wish he should have. Which is fortunate, because there just happens to be a place he’s eager to find . . .

Clinging to the back of a rukh, the prince arrives in the City of Gold. He is dazzled by trees of golden fruit, walls of gold and a magnificent palace containing forty spacious bedrooms. Suddenly, a flock of forty birds dives into a pool, and out of the water emerge forty handsome young men. Later, two more figures arrive – a sorceress and a beautiful princess – the very same princess who posed the riddle. Hiding, the prince watches her dance with her male entourage and lead one of them into a bedroom. When the lovers are asleep, the prince cuts off the man’s head and steals the

princess’s jewellery, then flies back on the rukh and rides to the palace where the riddle was asked.

There, he presents the decapitated lover’s head and the jewellery, revealing the truth about the princess’s secret trysts. Her dishonoured father hands her over to the prince, who orders her to use her magic to bring his brothers back to life. So the siblings are reunited, and they set off on their journey home, taking the princess with them. But as punishment for her misdeeds, she is put to death along the way.

Chapter 6

The Prodigal Returns

When Hanna arrived home in 1710, his family was not only delighted – they were amazed. He'd written to his brother Antoun from Marseilles, explaining he was boarding a ship to Smyrna. Later, they received news of a ship that had sunk en route to Iskenderun. When they heard nothing more for several weeks, they assumed the worst, and a Mass was said for the repose of his soul.

But his journey had been delayed by a detour to Constantinople. He fell in with the French ambassador, until another ambassador took the latter's place, worked as housekeeper and cook for a Venetian merchant, until a knife fight with a fellow employee brought that role to an end, and dabbled with acting as translator for a Swedish prince. Only after several months of wavering did he join a caravan towards Aleppo. Even then, his adventures were far from over. Taken for a physician, because of his French dress and loose hair, he used the medicine and skills he'd acquired from Lucas to gain admiration, but also entangled himself with the retinue of a sickly *agha* who wanted him to travel to Damascus. He lost track of his caravan several times and found himself crossing a perilous wasteland known as the Valley of Djinn. When at last he rode into Aleppo, his family was so relieved to see their long-lost revenant, and so wary of him hitting the road again, they set him up with a stall in the souk. It was an efficient handcuff – he worked as a draper for twenty-two years, married and had many children. A record of the Maronite community in 1740 finds one 'Hanna Dyab' as the head of a household of twelve.

But even homecoming didn't end the adventures. A few years after his return, in 1714, an old face showed up in Aleppo. Hearing that Paul Lucas was back in town, Hanna presented himself at the residence of the French consul to pay his respects. He invited Lucas to his house and prepared 'a

bed as comfortable as possible'. They might have parted on dubious terms, but Hanna bore his former master no ill will. Lucas, on the other hand . . .

'Why did you not inform me of your arrangement with the prince to undertake the voyage?' demanded the Frenchman, letting loose a stream of 'bitter reproaches' as soon as Hanna's brothers had left the guest room: 'it was my intention to procure a great boon for you. But you repulsed the grace that was given to you'.

Reading Lucas's words, it's hard to feel anything but antipathy towards him. But Hanna's lack of bitterness warns against too hasty a judgment. 'Destiny wished that I voyage with him in the lands that I have spoken of,' he tells us, sharing the fatalism so common in his tales. He also records an act of voluntary kindness that encourages us to view Lucas less harshly.

One day, while they were in the souk, the Frenchman bought a vitreous red stone (a cheramide, which Hanna likens to a carnelian). Hanna had mentioned his mother's low spirits, confining her to home for the past three years. When he hung the stone around her neck, following Lucas's instructions, it worked on her like magic. His mother asked to go to the hammam and chatted in a way she hadn't done for years. 'We were astonished by the effects of this stone,' Hanna recalled, 'it was as if it had worked a miracle.' The stone, Lucas explained, had drawn out her 'black humour': Prozac for the eighteenth century.

The visit to the souk shows that Hanna and his old master were back in their old partnership – Lucas doing the sleuthing, Hanna tasked with the practicalities. When Lucas learned about a mysterious cave on the outskirts of Aleppo, he instructed Hanna to find a local guide, and they set off on another adventure, climbing inside the subterranean chambers, blowing passageways open with gunpowder, and scattering straw on the ground so they wouldn't lose their way. When their wax candles went out, Hanna suggested it might be a bright idea to make their way back before they couldn't breathe any more. But Lucas insisted, with his customary brazenness: 'Be patient, let's take a few more steps . . .'

This final escapade joins the ends of Hanna's adventures together, like the connecting tips of an ouroboros. A mission to a cave had consolidated his association with Lucas early in the *Book of Travels*; at the end of his story, this unlikely double act is spelunking for marvels once again (which feels apt, considering how many caves feature in Hanna's tales – not only 'Aladdin' and 'Ali Baba', but other tales like 'Prince Ahmed and the Fairy

Banou', in which the fairy dwells in a cave network – reflecting the richness of caves around his home town, craggy with secrets and potential treasure). There's something cathartic about this final adventure. Like the stone hung around his mother's neck, it purges the demons of the past.

Hanna finished writing his memoir in 1764 – by then a man in his mid-seventies. Like the prince in 'The City of Gold', he had travelled widely, seen extraordinary wonders and experienced the dark side of life. It could be said of him, too, that he had an 'open' and 'lively' mind, although he wasn't as gung-ho as many of his heroes. As for the tales he recited, they had travelled around the world, inspiring new adaptations, parodies and pastiches. Not that Hanna had the slightest awareness of what he'd done . . .

Hanna Hits the Masses

The success of *The Thousand and One Nights* can be measured by the works it inspired. In eighteenth-century France alone, it stimulated the publication of an estimated seven hundred Eastern-style romances. From titans like Montesquieu (*Persian Letters*, 1721) and Voltaire (*Zadig*, 1747), the 'oriental' tale tumbled down the literary stepladder, through farcical parodies like Jacques Cazotte's *Thousand and One Fopperies: Tale*s *to put you to sleep* (1742), all the way down to the erotic comedies of Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon.

The latter was a notorious sensationalist whose works included *The Sofa* (1742), a bawdy satire located at the court of Scheherazade's grandson. 'Do you suppose that if Queen Scheherazade were still alive and here, she would not tell us the most lovely stories in the world . . .?' asks the bored Shah, and so a Brahmin storyteller narrates a peculiar tale about the transportation of his soul inside a series of sofas. As with many authors dressing their tales in motifs from faraway, Crébillon was criticising figures closer to home. His enervated Shah was interpreted as an attack on King Louis XV, and the satire was sufficiently piquant for him to be exiled from Paris. We'll encounter this trouble-rouser again, for he was writing *The Sofa* at the same time as a woman living with his father was composing the fairy tale 'Beauty and the Beast'.

These books were all published in Hanna's lifetime, but it's doubtful he knew about any of them. And yet it was Hanna's tales, of all the Arabic stories swinging around Europe, that tended to generate the most intense creative engagement. 'Aladdin', in particular, buckled itself into a position from which it has yet to be unseated: as the go-to Eastern tale for theatrical impresarios.

One of the earliest versions was written by the Anglo-Irish playwright John O'Keefe in 1788. Packed houses cheered the Covent Garden stage where it played. The masses relished the spectacle, while the manumission of the genie, the 'slave of the lamp', was picked up by Britain's growing abolition movement. Reading O'Keefe's play script is to be reminded of the volatility of issues that Hanna encountered on his own journey – such as the treatment of galley slaves on French ships. Not that slavery was a serious concern for O'Keefe – it was a way of crowing about Britain's superiority to France, tied to a broader nationalism expressed in verses about Britain's pseudo-oriental manufacturing prowess: 'No more from China, china bring,' declares one character, 'Here's English chinaware.' Here in an early form is the danger of orientalism with which the fortunes of the *Nights* were always flirting: appropriating Eastern culture for the profit of the West.

Which isn't to deny the charm and craft in three centuries' worth of engagement. Throughout the nineteenth century Hanna's tales – and especially 'Aladdin' – inspired some of the greatest literary minds in Europe: Dickens, Dumas, Jan Potocki, Tolstoy and many others. The impact in Denmark, of all countries, was especially profound. There, a play of *Aladdin* by the poet Adam Oehlenschläger (first published in 1805) was heralded as the pinnacle of Danish romanticism. The prominent nineteenth-century critic George Brandes declared that '*Aladdin* is the point of departure for contemporary Danish culture, the foundation stone upon which the building that constitutes Danish literature in the first half of this century is erected.'

This influence deepened in the work of Denmark's most famous author, who we'll be meeting later in this book. For Hans Christian Andersen, rising from provincial poverty to hobnob with royalty and famous men of letters, 'Aladdin' was a personal reference point. Raised on his father's readings from *The Thousand and One Nights*, Andersen made extensive use of the tale, whether comparing himself to Aladdin in his

autobiography, using elements from the story in his fairy tales, or setting the climax of his novel *Lucky Peer* (1870) at a performance of ‘Aladdin’.

What this suggests is a counterpoint to the fate of Giambattista Basile’s *Tale of Tales*: that stories don’t have to be stripped of their costuming to flourish in a new environment. In the case of the *Nights*, it’s the costuming that accounts for a large part of the appeal. For all the connections between the many story collections, each of them sails its own path to fortune, on seas stirred by the conditions of their times.

The Thousand and One Nights appeared in Europe at a time when the West was able to look at the East with growing confidence. The Ottoman siege of Vienna had been repelled in 1683, a close-run conflict that rippled out across the decades. In place of the villains of chivalric romances, Western readers were increasingly able to imagine Eastern heroes; whilst Eastern marvels were positioned as antidotes to rationalism, supporting an atmosphere of freewheeling imaginative excess that ran alongside growing Western confidence in an expanding, market-driven world. This atmosphere bled into the age of colonialism, as Europe’s ports filled with Eastern goods. But with the breakdown of colonialism and the subsequent angst – not to mention the spectre of oil, which recast the Middle East as a land of Bond villains and terrorists for action movies, rather than heroes for children to identify with – that engagement began to curdle.

Not that it was ever lost. We see it flicker in the movies, so well suited to wonder tales – whether Disney’s box office smash *Aladdin* (1992 and 2019) or the hand-crafted shadow imagery of Lotte Reiniger’s 1926 masterpiece *The Adventures of Prince Achmed*, which stirred together elements from several of Hanna’s tales (including the mechanical steed that flies through the skies in ‘The Ebony Horse’, the fairy princess Pari Banou, the magical birds and secret palace of ‘The Golden City’ and an appearance by Aladdin, wooing the hero’s sister) into the oldest surviving full-length animated film (and, for my money, the most beautifully rendered fairy tale film of them all). There are hundreds of others: the *Nights* will always inspire storytelling in the West, because they spark the imagination.

Is that something to fret about? ‘No!’ says one of the tales’ most recent and acclaimed reinterpreters, the Lebanese novelist Hanan al-Shaykh. ‘I’m so happy that the West thinks so highly of them. And it shows the Arabs, the Muslims, in a very modern way.’ Hanan was hailed as a ‘new

Scheherazade' when her novels began to be translated into English in the 1980s. 'I thought, why are they calling me that?' she tells me. 'But when I read the whole of the *Nights* I thought what an honour!' But, like many people in the Middle East, she hasn't always felt proud of these tales.

As a child, Hanan remembers the thrill of seeing the gold-tooled, leather-bound volumes of the *Nights* in a friend's house, where they were locked inside a glass cabinet, next to an elephant tusk. 'Her father forbade us from reading it,' she says, 'because of the sexuality in the stories.' She lost interest herself as a teenager. 'I didn't want to read folk tales about djinn and animals, I wanted to read Albert Camus and Françoise Sagan!'

These same objections have coloured the *Nights*' fortunes in the Middle East – dismissed by intellectuals or branded immoral by religious leaders, who've rarely lost their appetite for hurling the *Nights* on their bonfires. 'But when I started reading the *Nights* seriously,' Hanan tells me, 'I said, "Oh my God, these stories have everything!" ' She translated a selection of the tales for a theatre performance and a book, and found them embedded in the daily life around her – whether an aunt nicknamed Dalila the Wily, after a scammer in one of the most comical tales, who hoodwinks various VIPs and is pardoned by the caliph; or the professional storytellers, the *hakawatis*, who told stories from the *Nights* in coffee shops. One *hakawati* she met in the Lebanese city of Sidon had beguiled his audience so much, 'there were two men in the audience who couldn't take it when he broke off the story, so they rang the bell of his house and insisted, "you have to tell us what happened next!" '

The social depth of these stories is reinforced by another Middle Eastern storyteller, Chirine el-Ansari, who has travelled around the region narrating stories from *The Thousand and One Nights* in Yemen, Morocco, Syria (where she had to use old-school 1970s microphones to avoid interference with the equipment of the secret police), her native Egypt and elsewhere. 'When I was growing up in Cairo,' Chirine told me, 'my grandmother told me many stories. So did my aunt, maids and cooks, and people on the streets. Everyone was telling stories all the time, and later on I realised these were stories from *The Thousand and One Nights*.'

Storytellers like Chirine and Hanan reflect the deep interconnectedness of these tales with daily life. Which is why they have wrapped themselves around the minds of many Arabic literary heavyweights, surging against the tide of literary snobbery: writers like Tawfiq al-Hakim, who tracked

down an insane King Shahriyar in his 1934 play *Shahrazad*; the Sudanese novelist Tayeb Salih, whose anti-hero in *Season of Migration to the North* (1966) casts his broken lover as a 'beggar Scheherazade', in an astonishing novel whose intricate construction evokes the framing devices of the *Nights*; or the Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, who relocated Scheherazade's characters to a twentieth-century Cairo neighbourhood in *Arabian Nights and Days* (1979). Amongst more recent echoes are the Algerian novelist Salim Bachi's *New Adventures of Sindbad* (2010), which reimagines the eponymous sailor as a migrant in twenty-first-century Europe; and the acclaimed Moroccan author Tahar Ben Jelloun's *This Blinding Absence of Light* (2001), in which political prisoners tell their storytelling cellmate, 'Ever since you began telling us tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*, survival here has been more bearable than it was before.' There are many others: as I write these words, somebody somewhere is turning out another version. New tales are always spinning off the old.

For me, these tales have been part of my life since I shone a torch under my duvet as a child, floating with Sindbad on the wings of the rukh, riding with the prince on the ebony horse. I've studied and taught in Arab medinas, lived in Jerusalem and Fez, and visited other cities around the region, experiencing these tales through the people around me: the raconteurs of Aleppo, spellbinding me in the back rooms of their shops with stories of forbidden romance; the *shebab* (young guys) of Fez, who called me 'Ali Baba' because my beard was so scruffy, 'like people in old times'. I've sat in teahouses listening to tales about the djinn – disturbing tales about men possessed, smoking marijuana in abandoned houses, released from their enchantments only by the reading of Quranic verses. 'I could feel the pain inside me,' said a friend called Nabeel, 'something that wanted to stay but was suffering. After the djinn had left, I slept for a couple of days; I felt like I had been cleaned.'

Is this a collision between different worlds, or a natural elision between facets of the same one? When you're chatting about Scheherazade or the djinn while soldiers are patrolling the souk with M16 rifles or the guy telling the tale is rolling a spliff? But that's the point: the stories were incubated in these streets. Time may have detached many of the tales from their roots, but not all those roots have been gnawed away.

Hanna heard these tales in the streets around him. He learned them from the people who raised him, as did later storytellers like Chirine and Hanan. How much of himself he brought to these tales is a matter of speculation, but the interconnectedness between the stories and his own adventurous life offers an answer of sorts. The stories may have been embellished and fine-tuned by Antoine Galland – and his literary achievement deserves celebration – but it was Hanna who spun those tales to him. In the process, he gave us the stories that are still the first imaginative experiences of the East for so many of us. Stories that inspired many of the fairy tellers we'll be visiting in the rest of this book.

So let's salute the candid, curious, compassionate Hanna Dyab, and seek out our next teller. But first we need to visit one of the wonders of Paris that Hanna wasn't able to witness: the literary salons, the aristocratic women who brushed off life's pressures in their asylum of fairies. It's time to put on our powdered wigs and beauty patches, settle down on Louis XIV armchairs, sip a lemon sherbet or raspberry liqueur and listen to another magical tale . . .

PART THREE

Of Shrews and Salons

Charming Beauty, don’t regret what you have just quit.
A more illustrious fate awaits you, but if you want to merit it,
refrain from allowing yourself to be seduced by appearances.

The Lady to Belle, ‘Beauty and the Beast’ (1740)

The Tale of the Ram

The candid princess Merveilleuse refuses to flatter her father. When he asks his daughters about their dreams, she tells him she had a vision of him serving her and placing his crown on her head. So incensed is the king by this irreverent vision that he orders a huntsman to slay her in the forest and bring back her tongue and heart as proof. Fortunately for the princess, she has three loyal companions – a dog, an ape and a Moorish slave – who kill themselves so the soft-hearted huntsman can return with the necessary organs.

Meanwhile, Merveilleuse wanders through the forest until she finds a glade. There, surrounded by sheep, is a golden-horned ram with ‘all the sense and delicacy which is required for agreeable conversation’. He invites her into his enchanted cavern, where Spanish wine flows in fountains and there are delightful refreshments of cake, foie gras and coffee. Her host, it turns out, was a handsome prince until he was turned into a ram by a curse. But this is only a temporary condition, and so charmed is Merveilleuse that she accepts him as her husband. While she’s waiting for him to turn back into a handsome prince, she kills the time by attending her sisters’ weddings, in disguise.

After the first wedding, Merveilleuse returns to the ram’s enchanted cavern, and eagerly awaits the second; but he begs her not to stay away too long, or his heart will break. However, finding herself beside her father at the second wedding, she reveals her true identity. Full of remorse, the king begs her forgiveness. To prove his regret, he kneels to wash her hands from a golden ewer and places his crown on her head, fulfilling the dream that led to his murderous command. Together, they ride out to greet the people, but at the gate of the palace they discover a terrible sight.

Lying on the ground before them is the body of the ram. He’d been knocking on the gates of the palace, protesting that he was Merveilleuse’s husband. None of the guards would let him pass, and before the princess could reach him he died of a broken heart. Poor Merveilleuse! She has

won the crown, but what does that matter when she has lost the lover with whom she had hoped to share it?

Chapter 7

A Shrew and a Spy

Before Hanna Dyab made it to Paris, fairy telling in France had already gone viral. Around ninety tales from the 1690s have survived, two-thirds of which were written by women. High society may have been their habitat, but it didn't always favour them. Some escaped from unhappy marriages, others refused to marry at all. So it's little surprise that the most common tale they recycled was the one about the heroine forced to live with a monster. Ram or rhinoceros, blue bird or wild boar, dragon, dwarf or dolphin: the inauspicious groom appeared in many guises. But it wasn't until 1740 that the tale found its definitive mould. All those other versions would be discarded, forgotten prototypes for the final form, which proved so popular it's managed to repel or absorb every later attempt to reimagine the story.

'Beauty and the Beast' was written by an impoverished aristocrat who tumbled through a tricky widowhood to find herself as the live-in mistress to a cantankerous playwright. Although her story would establish itself as one of the most beloved of all fairy tales, it would take time and a later rewriting for that to happen. Little known in her lifetime, Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve, the woman who Voltaire called 'that old shrew', was buried under a series of damning epitaphs. 'She had a very great facility for making mediocrities,' declared one critic; another accused her of 'the most common details, no characters or sentiments, and the flattest style'; another condemned her writing as 'uneven, wordy, incorrect' (although it was admitted, a little grudgingly, that 'Her fairy tales are written with a good measure of grace and finesse').

In order to understand her famous tale, and the circumstances that spawned it, we need to look at the previous versions. Which brings us to the scandalous life of the Baroness d'Aulnoy – *salonnière*, spy and spinner of tales – and the mischievously imaginative members of her circle: a

countess accused of lesbianism, a lady-in-waiting who disguised herself as a bear, the pipe-smoking princess to whom they dedicated their works, and the court secretary who outsold them all.

This book being a trail, shifting geographically with every part, we are only able to pay a brief visit to the *conteuses* – the female storytellers who developed the fairy tale as a literary art form. We're dropping in on them, like a dilettante passing through one of their salons, before shining our light on one of the most unjustly neglected fairy tellers of all.

Tea with Tales

If you happened to live in Paris in the 1690s and moved in the right circles – to be precise, if you managed to wangle an invitation to the Marquise de Lambert's Tuesday salon evenings – you were in for a treat. Under the Gobelin tapestries of her luxurious drawing room in the Hôtel de Nevers, about half a mile north of the Louvre, you could enjoy refreshments of sweetmeats and raspberry cordials, and exchange witty banter with some of the spiciest wits of the age. Card games and drunkenness were forbidden, as was any form of incivility to ladies. Nodding courteously under powdered wigs, the guests skipped around subjects including 'the problem of happiness' and 'the rejection of injustices born of the organization of hierarchical society'. As one guest, the Marquis d'Argenson, put it: 'The learned brought knowledge and enlightenment; the others brought those good manners and that urbanity which even the worthy need to acquire.'

Although the Marquise de Lambert refrained from publishing until late in life (and even then with reservations), she was a passionate believer in the intellectual rights of women, and invited many female authors to her salon. Countesses as well as *conteuses*, women like Marie-Catherine, Baroness d'Aulnoy, and her friend Henriette-Julie, Comtesse de Murat, enchanted their audiences with surreal tales about animal armies, foolish kings and spiteful stepmothers, and the resourceful heroines who danced between these adversaries and dressed themselves, when the occasion allowed, in elaborate frocks.

Another attendee of the marquise's salon, Catherine Bernard, set out the rules for this kind of tale. In her book *Ines de Cordoue* (published 1696)

she wrote: ‘the adventures should always counter plausibility and the sentiments should always be natural’. The rule is cited in the context of a fairy-telling contest, which reminds us that the *conteuses* were not only friends, they were also competitors, spinning gold while the going was good.

They didn’t have long.

Fairy tales may look like innocent trinkets from afar, but authoritarian regimes have a knack for shattering their baubles. Representing polite society in 1699, the influential Abbé de Villiers complained about ‘these piles of fairy tales, which have assassinated us for the last year or so’ and bemoaned a state in which ‘lazy and ignorant women readers read the productions of lazy and ignorant women writers’. Talking peacocks? Sherbet-drinking rams? Dwarves with diamond swords? Individually, they may have looked like shimmering beads, but string enough of them together, feared their opponents, and you’d have a necklace powerful enough to strangle the patriarchy.

The critique, as well as the competition amongst the tellers, is illustrated by the Baroness d’Aulnoy’s ‘Prince Marcassin’ (1697).[FN1] A queen gives birth to a wild boar, who despite wearing a velvet bonnet and diamond bracelets is unable to conceal his innate piggishness. He drives one wife to suicide, murders another, and only finds peace with a third, whose patient guile is rewarded when she discovers that he can shed his pig skin at night and turn into a handsome prince. This tale of women at the mercy of male violence struck a chord: it was retold by Henriette-Julie, Comtesse de Murat, in ‘The Pig King’ (1699). Considering how many of their circle found themselves forced into marriages with drunken rakes addicted to snuff and gambling and other women, this is hardly surprising.

But tales of ‘monster-grooms’ were only one way to critique the gender rigidity of Louis XIV’s France, and the *conteuses* found many others. There was the all-female sanctuary, which features in the Baroness d’Aulnoy’s ‘The Imp Prince’: an invisible prince discovers an island inhabited only by women, guarded by Amazons and celebrating the arts and sciences. As a reward for his excellence, the prince is allowed to stay. Another story type was the maiden in the tower, reimagined in a precursor to ‘Rapunzel’ by Charlotte-Rose de Caumont de La Force (a cousin of the Comtesse de Murat and lady-in-waiting to their collective benefactor,

Marie Anne de Bourbon, Princesse de Conti). Pointedly, de La Force pinned the blame for the baby's abduction on the feckless father; and rather than being rescued by the prince, the heroine's happy ending depends on the wicked fairy's change of heart: female solidarity wins the day.

For all the wit and subversive pleasures of these tales, however, it was a well-connected man who outdid them all in sales. His name was Charles Perrault.

A lawyer with his own office at Versailles, he'd been a member of the powerful finance minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert's 'kitchen cabinet'. Working for Colbert, he played a key role in spin-doctoring the image of the Sun King. Perrault clearly knew a thing or two about communicating to the masses, so *quelle surprise* that when it came to fairy tales, his instincts were so ruthlessly effective. Having been introduced to the salons through his kinship with one of the storytellers (Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier), he listened to their tales and carved them to the bones, grafting pithy morals on to the endings and including scenes of church ritual (such as Sleeping Beauty's baptism) to please the authorities. The tales were easy for children to follow, and the parents believed they were morally nourishing. Ergo: instant bestseller.

Perrault's *Tales of Mother Goose*[FN2] came out in 1697. Over the next year and a half fairy tale collections flooded the bookshops of France. Then, like a finger pricked on a spinning-wheel, the whole show collapsed into a coma. Royal licences dried up, and the tellers found themselves booted out of public life.

The natural exhaustion of a fad? Or was something more sinister behind it? Within a few years Antoine Galland's translations of *The Thousand and One Nights* were shining a new path for tales of wonders. But most of the *conteuses* were still in their prime, and fairy telling isn't a fad: it isn't like the chivalric epic or third wave ska. Something else was going on. If we look at the fates of the individual fairy tellers, we can trace a disturbing pattern.

The Hit List

First to be knocked out was Charlotte-Rose de La Force. She ran into trouble when she married the much younger Charles Le Brion, a conspicuous reversal of the usual pattern, in 1687. Charles's father had the marriage dissolved after just ten days, and the groom interred in a castle. Undaunted, she tracked him down, disguised herself as a bear and hid amongst the real-life bears brought to the castle for entertainment.

A good tale for the salons, sure, but in the sanctimonious bubble of Louis XIV's court the Protestant-born de La Force was attracting unwanted suspicions. Accused of penning blasphemous verses in 1697, she lost her role as a royal lady-in-waiting and was forced to retreat to the abbey of Gercy-en-Brie, where she would remain for the next sixteen years. It proved a convenient writer's retreat, at least, and there she penned her tales.

While de La Force was lighting candles in Picardy, her fellow salon-goers were still living the high life. In December 1699, with three collections of fairy tales and a ghost story under her belt, the imaginative Henriette-Julie, Comtesse de Murat, was accused of 'shocking practices and beliefs', including lesbianism (although, if that had been a real issue, she would hardly have been the only noblewoman booted out of town), in a report by the Paris lieutenant general of police. Estranged from her husband and pregnant (which hardly confirmed the accusation of sapphic love), she was exiled to the Château de Loches in 1702. For the next seven years she remained under lock and key, except for trips to church and an unsuccessful escape bid, disguised as a man. Not that her imagination was stifled – she wrote her greatest tale, 'The Goblins of Kernosy Castle', during this period. But dropsy and arthritis were overtaking her body, and a year after she was granted an official pardon, in 1716, she died in her family's chateau.

Other fairy tellers fell silent around the same time: the versatile Catherine Bernard, for example, stopped publishing after 1697 and died in poverty in 1712. A lot of names to consider, but it's important that we don't strike them out: after all, that's what history has done. And among them all, there's one name that should never be forgotten: Marie-Catherine, the Baroness d'Aulnoy. The most prolific and influential of the *conteuses*, she too was silenced, forced to shut up her salon and set down her pen. Although, in the baroness's case, trouble had been dogging her for a while.

Back in 1666, aged fifteen, she was forced to marry a high-rolling nobleman three times her age. She managed three years of marital misery and the birth of a couple of children before her husband found himself staring at the world through a barred window in the Bastille. He had made the indiscreet error, allegedly, of criticising the royal taxes.

The rumour-mill pinned it on the baroness, claiming she'd stitched up her detested husband in league with her mother and their male lovers. The state agreed: when the baron overturned the charges, the lovers were executed and arrest warrants issued for the baroness and her mother. Fortunately – as any reader of her tales can attest – she was a nimble thinker. When officers arrived on an early morning summons, she used the excuse of dressing herself in her boudoir to squeeze through a window and hide in the nearby church of Saint-Germain, concealing herself (or so whispered the rumour-mongers) under a convenient bush.

After a brief stay in Belgium, London provided a safe haven in 1675–6. She kept up her spirits with the company of notorious rakes like the Duke of Monmouth, had her portrait painted by Charles II's court painter, admired the king's mistress Nell Gwynn and gave birth to at least one more child, of indeterminate paternity. But her mother had made her way to Spain, and the baroness followed her there. She had already made contact with Versailles, or so the story goes, and atoned for her previous misdemeanours by spying on VIPs in Madrid. Her memoir about her time in Spain was a bestseller, auguring the success her fairy tales would enjoy.

Welcomed back to Paris around 1685, the baroness threw herself into the salon scene, cultivating influential contacts like the Princesse de Conti, who became the most prestigious guest at the salon she launched on the narrow rue Saint-Benoît. Her poky dwelling may not have been the *beau monde*'s glitziest address, but the baroness knew how to draw a crowd. Many afternoons found her surrounded by her fellow storytellers, such as the Comtesse de Murat and Charles Perrault, while Charlotte-Rose de La Force attended the Princesse de Conti, who listened to their tales through the mist of her tobacco pipe, with a glass of wine permanently at hand. It was here that the baroness conjured her tales, 'in the midst of the noise', as the Comtesse de Murat reported, 'of the hordes of people who visited her'.

The baroness is often credited as the inventor of the term *contes de fées* or 'fairy tales'. In her first fairy tale, 'The Island of Happiness' (published

in 1690), she used the phrase ‘a tale similar to those of fairies’; but it wasn’t until 1697 that *contes de fées* appeared, as the title of her collection. ‘The Island of Happiness’ (inserted in a longer, bestselling novel called *Hippolite, the Count of Duglas*) concerns a Russian prince lost in a forest, carried by the West Wind to an enchanted kingdom. There, he lives with a fairy queen until he pines for worldly glory on the field of battle. Assuming he’s only been away for a short while, he discovers to his horror that his absence has spanned not just three months but three centuries. Death snares him at last, having been waiting patiently for its quarry.

Isolation and sadness: so it would end for the baroness. In 1699 her friend, Angelique Ticquet, was convicted for commissioning her porter and a hired assassin to murder her husband. After a failed poisoning and a botched ambush, three bullets failed to slay him, and Madame Ticquet made her final public appearance on the scaffold, where she turned out to be nearly as hard to kill as her husband: the executioner had to swing his sword three times before her famously beautiful head finally rolled. For the baroness, the scandal was particularly embarrassing since Madame Ticquet had been attending her salon on the day of the crime.

With her previous record (not to mention all the slain husbands in her tales), the baroness didn’t stand a chance. She was forced to close her salon and retire from public life, echoing the grief-stricken Princess Felicité in her tale, who seals up her pleasure palace after the death of her beloved prince. It was indeed the end of an era. The baroness would publish no more fairy tales and would die, six years later, quietly and unremarked, in her little house on rue Saint-Benoît.

Over the preceding decade she had developed and refined the ‘monster-groom’ tales. Sometimes the groom became a loathsome monster pawing over a princess whose heart he could never win, at other times a handsome prince desperate to shatter a curse. Of the twenty-four tales contained in the baroness’s two fairy tale collections, nearly half concern heroines married to, or courted by, monsters or animals: a couple of giants, a serpent, an ogre, a dragon and a gang of monsters, a canary, an ugly fairy king, a hunchback prince, a ram, a wild boar, a dwarf. It’s as if she was striving for the perfect rendering, conjuring the tale in different forms like an enchanter testing the various metamorphoses she could fathom with her spells.

The baroness's own bitter experience with love shadows these tales. But she went beyond the monster-groom, charting female agency in tales like 'Belle-Belle', in which the heroine disguises herself as a man, slays a dragon and brushes off the attentions of an amorous lady-in-waiting; and presenting all-female utopias in tales like 'The Island of Happiness'. She also dramatised – in a riposte to the matrimonial system of the day – the power of women in the granting or withholding of love. Hence the survival of the eponymous lover in 'The Ram' depends on the heroine's return. For all the monster-grooms' fearsomeness, the power to keep them alive is invested in the heroines.

In the baroness's purportedly autobiographical *Memoirs of the Court of France* (1692), she described a lover 'drowning in his own blood', who reached out to her and declared, 'the passion that I have had for you, Madame, has put me in the state where you see me'. Whether or not it's strictly autobiographical, the logic is apparent. Sold like chattel to husbands they never wanted, dependent on the men who controlled the distribution of wealth, the *conteuses* avenged themselves in the salons, doctoring the charters of power through their stories. Princess Merveilleuse's penitent father offers his daughter the crown in 'The Ram'; 'Finette Cendron' bundles an ogre into an oven and cuts off his wife's head with a hatchet; and Marie-Jeanne L'Héritier's 'Subtle Princess' pushes an unwanted suitor into a barrel studded with nails and rolls him down a mountain.

Training their shimmering imaginations on the constraints that shackled their lives, these *conteuses* paved the way for another noble-born fairy teller, who eclipsed them with the definitive monster-groom tale. She wasn't part of the salon scene. When the baroness had closed her salon and was breathing her last on the rue Saint-Benoît, our next teller was a twenty-year-old aristocrat preparing for marriage. Judging by the experiences of the *conteuses* we've met so far, this is usually where things start to fall apart. So it's the perfect moment to take up her acquaintance . . .

The Tale of a Rose, a Beast and an Enchanted Palace

Returning from a disastrous business trip, a down-at-luck merchant seeks shelter from a storm. To his relief, a beautiful palace appears in the middle of a forest. He climbs an agate staircase with a carved golden railing, sits down to a delicious meal and sleeps in a luxurious bed, but he can't find any host to thank.

In the morning, remembering his youngest daughter's wish, he plucks a rose for her, only to be accosted by a terrifying Beast. His life is forfeit, declares the monster, unless he fulfils a terrible condition: he must bring one of his daughters to live with the Beast. Returned to his house by a magical horse, the merchant resists these terms, but his youngest daughter insists she will fulfil his pledge.

So Belle is installed as the Beast's solitary guest. She wanders his palace, attended by monkeys dressed as courtiers and opera-singing parrots, gazing into a mirror that shows her the Paris Opera and the fair of Saint-Germain. Of all the strange delights that surround her, the most pleasurable is a handsome lover who visits her dreams, and whose beautiful form she finds in a portrait hanging in the palace. But the company of the Beast is less agreeable. His conversation is tedious, and he keeps asking the same question: will she let him sleep with her?

'No, Beast,' she tells him.

Over time, however, she finds the theriomorph less terrifying and nauseating. His kindness touches her, although she still can't imagine loving him. However, when he allows her to visit her family, she is surprised by how much she misses him. Returning to the palace after a two-month absence, she is devastated to find the Beast lying in the garden, wasted by lovesickness. She tends to him and tells him she loves him. Yes, she says, she will marry him. On the morning after their wedding, she wakes up to find her groom transformed – he is the young man from her dreams, a prince who was cursed by an evil fairy.

A rosy future appears to await them. But, before they are able to knuckle down to married life, an obstacle appears: the prince's mother

refuses to sanction his marriage to a mere merchant’s daughter. Fortunately, a kindlier fairy explains there is no issue: Belle isn’t a merchant’s daughter, after all. Her father is a fairy king who believed his infant daughter was eaten by a bear. It was the kindly fairy who spirited her away, to save her from the machinations of a court schemer, installing her in the merchant’s house at the very moment the merchant’s own infant daughter had died. So now Belle, daughter of a king and wife of a prince, is free to celebrate her wedding with all possible happiness.

Chapter 8

Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve

Like self-adapting genes or virulent diseases, the classic fairy tales sweep through one epoch after another. But the ingenuity of the Baroness d'Aulnoy's circle is stuck in time. Like so many princesses in their tales, they're waiting for an opportunity to break out of their imprisonment into the big wide world.

Considering the wit and wily plotting of these tales, their obscurity is all the more dispiriting. But literary history has a way of fairy-dusting the unlikely. For when it comes to the most successful fairy tale of the eighteenth century, it had the same disadvantages to overcome. It was printed in an illicit edition in 1740, when female fairy tellers were unable to secure publishing licences. But despite these prejudices it managed to flourish, making its closing line strangely prophetic: 'there would be talk eternally of the prodigious adventures of the Beauty and the Beast'.

Although it was influenced by earlier tales going all the way back to 'Cupid and Psyche' from the second century ad (and, according to phylogenetic research, thousands of years earlier), this was the first version of the story we know as 'Beauty and the Beast': with that title, with Belle as its heroine, her father an improvident merchant, the Beast as a fairy prince under the curse of an embittered would-be lover, the curse broken by the heroine's love. Not that the author has received much of the credit for it. Her story has been cherished, intensely and increasingly, for more than two and a half centuries, but literary history has been stubbornly indifferent to its creator. Which is why we need to spell her out in big bold letters: GABRIELLE-SUZANNE BARBOT DE VILLENEUVE.

And this is her tale . . .

The Insolvent Ingénue

La Rochelle, 31 January 1706: behind heavy wigs and faces smeared white with rice powder, patches to disguise the markings of the pox and cherry-red lip paint, here come the bride and groom. He is Jean-Baptiste Gaalon de Villeneuve, younger son of an aristocratic family from Poitou, a lieutenant colonel in the French army. His bride is the twenty-year-old daughter of a recently deceased squire, an ingénue from the minor aristocracy. If we could see her now, we'd see dark inky eyes peering at her well-wishers from under a few stray curls of brown hair, a lustre only slightly dimmed by her veil.

In one of the stories Gabrielle-Suzanne would later write, the divinity known as Patience declares that marriage, from the perspective of the bride, is 'an eternal slavery'. This may have been experience talking. For Gabrielle-Suzanne, as for many of the *conteuses* who preceded her, marriage was a disaster. Her husband was an habitué of gaming tables who ran up so many debts that his miserable bride requested a separation of their assets just six months after they'd tied the knot. Three witnesses agreed that Gaalon had 'dissipated the greater part of his wealth' and 'contracted as many debts before his marriage as since'. He wasn't much luckier on the battlefield: just five years later, he fell at Pamplona.

This didn't make matters easier for the twenty-six-year-old widow. Chained to her husband's debts, Gabrielle-Suzanne had to parcel out the estate piece by piece, her property slipping away in 'a succession of sales, attempts at recovery, contracts of retrocession, debtors' seizures or standing requests', until what remained was delivered to Mathieu Martin de Chassiron, a former corsair who had been recently ennobled. A year after acquiring Gabrielle-Suzanne's estate, de Chassiron would become director of the Compagne des Indes (the French counterpart to the East India Company). Scoring his family's rise against Gabrielle-Suzanne's fall, he took her father's old position in the *présidial* of La Rochelle.

Not only was she bankrupt, Gabrielle-Suzanne was also bereaved – she gave birth in 1708 and her daughter died around the age of two. In the face of such harrowing circumstances, she couldn't even turn to her family for support. Her mother had successfully sued her four daughters for the inheritance of their late father, and had also reneged on Gabrielle-Suzanne's dowry, which suggests there was little love lost between mother and daughter. As for her sisters: 'Beauty and the Beast' is no autobiography, but it's hard to resist the suspicion there's a personal stake

in Belle's three shallow sisters, with their 'taste for luxury and vanity', considering the absence of sisterly warmth in the rest of Gabrielle-Suzanne's fiction.

The early passages of 'Beauty and the Beast' describe a family's plunge into 'frightful poverty', abandoned by their friends, who, 'without exception, ceased their acquaintance', and tortured by the 'memory of their early years, rapidly passed in the midst of laughter and games'. It's a theme that Gabrielle-Suzanne explored in more detail in her late and very popular novel, *The Gardener of Vincennes* (published 1753). 'I was a little astonished by the manner in which I came to leave my paternal home,' recalls a middle-aged countess, 'and it was impossible for me to do so without shedding some tears.' Financial carelessness on the part of her father and husband, both of whom have the male tendency of dying at the moment when their fortunes hit rock bottom, force the countess to sack a raft of pesky servants, mortgage the estate, sell it off piece by piece, and eventually move to Paris.

The embattled countess supports herself and her children by setting up a vegetable garden. For Gabrielle-Suzanne, a different kind of cultivation would keep her off the streets. In a state of emergency, she 'sought to gain by her pen', to quote an eighteenth-century biographer, 'the security that destiny had refused her.'

As she notes in 'Beauty and the Beast', 'with time and courage, there is no misfortune that cannot be vanquished'. Time is the key here: she was already in her forties when she arrived in Paris, her best years behind her, according to social convention. But she was about to uncover barely tapped resources. She had been writing stories since at least the 1720s, although until she arrived in Paris none had been published. Over time, her extraordinary imagination would conjure up not only an enchanted palace ruled by a Beast but also the realm where Time palpitates his ever-flapping wings in a court of endless bustle, and the underwater Naiads, observing human goings-on from a crystal vault shimmering with fish.

Now in Paris, Gabrielle-Suzanne presented her first story to the public in 1733: *The Conjugal Phoenix*, a novella about a dissipated marquis's marriage to the resourceful daughter of a laundress, who lives in a dwelling 'so nasty and humid that the name of den was the most honourable of those that we could give to it'.

Again, we see Gabrielle-Suzanne's fiction overlapping with her life. Like the marquis in her story, she hid her aristocratic status. Instead of subjecting herself to the hypocritical pity of Versailles, she sought a more active solution, working as a *gouvernante*, a housekeeper, in one of the most squalid streets in Paris.[FN1] Her employer was no prince in disguise, although some of his critics did call him a beast. He was one of the strangest men in a city that specialised in strange men. His name was Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon.

The Barbarian of the rue de Maçon

Asked why he chose such morbid subjects for his plays, Crébillon explained: 'Corneille took heaven, Racine the earth. Only hell was left for me.' Typical was *Atrée*, performed in 1707, which Voltaire described as 'the work of a Vandal'. In its feverish climax, the vengeful hero forces his brother to drink the blood of his slain sons.

Given the sordid subjects he chose for his plays, the narrow street where Crébillon languished in the mid-1730s was fitting. Imagine Gabrielle-Suzanne treading along the rue de Maçon for the first time: unplugging her pattens from the mud, holding up the hem of a broadcloth cloak, inching her face deeper inside her hood to keep out the stench, knocked by the elbows of porters and prostitutes.

A door creaks open and barking sounds rise to a ferocious pitch, interspersed with occasional purring. Gabrielle-Suzanne treads carefully, trying to avoid the dog shit spattering the steps, blinking against thick waves of tobacco smoke. At last, the mist clears to show a six-foot-tall giant in his late fifties, a man so addicted to smoking he was known as Le Fumeur, a man whose physiognomy was compared (by the famous rake and adventurer, Casanova) to that of a lion.

You might have expected a playwright of Crébillon's standing to have a more palatial residence. After all, many of his contemporaries considered him greater than Voltaire. But he'd been struck down by the death of his wife and a string of professional failures – three in a row, culminating in the last of them, *Pyrrhus*, receiving just a single performance, in 1726.

Turning his back on society, Crébillon buried himself in a jungle of house plants, with more than thirty stray cats and dogs for company. Asked

why he chose to live with so many animals, he gave a simple reply: ‘Because I know men.’

This was the household in which Gabrielle-Suzanne found her refuge. To many, her boss was an anti-social eccentric ‘without manners’, according to the writer Charles Collé (who actually claimed to be his friend), ‘without feelings, without spirit and without agreement in his dealings’. Voltaire called him simply ‘Crébillon the Barbarian’. Others were more charitable. ‘All the unfortunates had rights on his heart,’ wrote the eighteenth-century literary biographer Joseph de La Porte, ‘even beasts, especially if they suffered, excited his compassion’; and Casanova, who regularly visited him for French lessons, praised his ability to ‘tell a good story without laughing’, although he also pointed out that ‘he spent his life at home, seldom going out, and seeing hardly anyone’, which for a party animal like Casanova was pretty weird. Collectively, these accounts sketch out a picture of a man milder than his forbidding exterior suggested, mired in seclusion and probably suffering depression. It’s hard to think of a better model for the Beast.

Around this time, his son, Crébillon *fils*, was writing sensationalist and controversial tales of his own, often with an orientalist slant. Amongst these was *The Sofa*, published in 1742, just two years after ‘Beauty and the Beast’, which led to Crébillon junior being exiled from Paris. Although father and son were known to be close, and even socialised, their mutually acerbic personalities led to frequent clashes. Crébillon junior established a literary club called Le Caveau (The Vault), which met at a bar near his father’s house. At one gathering, Crébillon senior was asked what he considered his greatest work. It was an embarrassing question, but ‘that one is the worst!’ replied the playwright, pointing to his son. Sardonic humour, however, was in the blood. ‘Not so much pride, if you please, sir,’ retorted Crébillon junior. ‘Wait until it is proven which works belong to you.’ The father glared at his son with ‘a menacing air’, according to Collé, and brusquely left the gathering, never to return.

Despite his irascibility, Crébillon picked up several lofty positions, including that of royal literary censor. So he needed a skilful and diplomatic helpmate, and he was lucky to find one in the shape of Gabrielle-Suzanne. Their cohabitation dovetailed with her literary career. She was mentioned by Voltaire as Crébillon’s *gouvernante* or housekeeper (as well as his ‘old muse’) in a letter dated 1733, and at the end of the

same year her novella, *The Conjugal Phoenix*, was granted a licence to print. She would remain with Crébillon for the rest of her life, and it was under his roof that she would die, in 1755.

During this partnership of more than twenty years, she became more than just a *gouvernante*. A police report from January 1748 claimed that Crébillon 'has as his mistress Madame de Villeneuve who performs the role of censor in his place'. Just how indispensable she had become to the playwright was recorded by Casanova:

> His governess took care of everything, including his money, and made sure he lacked for nothing . . . [she] would read him the works brought for his examination, and she would stop reading when she believed something deserved his censure, but sometimes they were of a different opinion, and then their arguments were truly comical.

What a bizarre image! Europe's most celebrated romancer met the author of its most influential romantic tale – and recognised little more than a housekeeping battleaxe. Still, Casanova did at least supply one of the warmer descriptions. Voltaire, conscious of his rivalry with Crébillon, wrote of his fear about 'the adventures to which that old shrew de Villeneuve and her cats expose my manuscript'. Matching him for lurid contempt was the diarist Louis Mercier, who visited Crébillon in the 1750s and recalled a flurry of barking animals, stairs covered in excrement and a housekeeper with 'the biggest nose and the most malignantly fervent eyes I have ever seen in my life. She is the mistress of the poet.' On one point, at least, all these accounts agree: Gabrielle-Suzanne had taken firm control of Crébillon's household, and was not to be trifled with.

And she made it a productive household. In 1740 her own story collection was printed – *The Young American, or Sailors' Tales*, containing two long fairy tales – 'Beauty and the Beast' and 'The Naiads'. She would produce another collection, *The Solitary Beauties*, containing three more fairy tales, in 1745. A few years later, Crébillon himself emerged at last from his public silence. The opening night of *Catalina* (1748) was attended by a crowd of 1,300, including the king's powerful mistress (and a former singing student of Crébillon's), Madame de Pompadour. It was a triumphant comeback – and one that's hard to imagine happening without the 'old shrew' who did so much to look after him.

An Agreeable Imprisonment

To the Parisian suburb of Vincennes: pulling ourselves away from the charcuteries and chocolatiers, on avenues so tidily swept they look ripe for one of those TV ads set in Parisian paradise, we're shadowed by a grim relic of the *Ancien Régime*. Crenellations snarl over the counterscarped moat, framing the blockhouses, Gothic chapel, royal pavilion and the tallest fortified tower in Europe. The Château de Vincennes used to be the palace of the French kings, and as a child Louis XIV knew it as home. But after the Sun King established his court at Versailles, Vincennes atrophied into a symbol of aristocratic decay, repurposed as a dungeon for the high-born.

Passing under the royal coat of arms (partially damaged by revolutionaries of 1789) and the sharp iron teeth of the portcullis, feet crunch on pathway gravel and the crinkly yellow leaves fallen from the chestnut trees. To the left, winged angels and saints float beside the ribbed arches of the Holy Chapel, where long-necked gargoyles veer from so many angles they look like a pack of sky-raiding beasts turned to stone in the middle of a hunt.

Inside the fifty-two-metre-high keep, steps tumble from a stone-walled walkway scratched with lovers' graffiti. Most of the tags span the last few years since it's been open to the public, but an elaborate carving inside puts them to shame: engraved over a wide and beautifully sculpted heart is the name of François Henri de Poeffule, a prisoner of war from 1672.

In an octagonal chapel, beyond the petrified monstrosities scowling above the corbels – a lion, a long-eared bat – other prisoners painted scenes that appear like memories from their nightmares as well as their dreams. Above a candelabrum and the domes of a Byzantine-style church is a grisly face contained inside a flask, with large sinister eyes, shadowy cheeks and an overhanging upper lip: a prisoner's monstrous imagining.

Rooms join up, connected by surprising passageways, and staircases spiral between the floors. The interconnecting chambers, along with the strange creatures, suggest the Beast's castle – those eerie early scenes when Belle wanders the long walkways of her new abode, 'surprised' when 'she opened a door and found herself in her bedroom, which she had thought far away from that beautiful gallery, in which she had only arrived by circling through a series of apartments that composed the building'.

Gabrielle-Suzanne knew Vincennes well enough to use it as the setting for her celebrated late novel, *The Gardener of Vincennes.* But was this chateau in her mind when she was writing her most famous tale? Another castle is more obviously inscribed in the descriptions of 'Beauty and the Beast'. With its 'rows of extremely tall orange-trees', statues installed between them, and the 'countless fountains' of its garden, not to mention a chamber known as the 'hall of mirrors', the theriomorph's domain evokes the most impressive palace of its day (it's a reflection of the powerful cultural influence of Versailles that it gleams behind not just one but two great fairy tales of the period – 'Aladdin' as well as 'Beauty and the Beast').

The human imagination is nomadic, so there's no reason why fairy tale inspiration should confine itself to a single location. The Beast's abode is a pleasure palace, where fireworks light the sky to herald Belle's arrival, courtier monkeys keep her company and parrots sing arias. But it is also the fearsome lair where she anticipates her imminent death. So it makes sense that Gabrielle-Suzanne was imaginatively influenced by two very different chateaux, one associated in her time with present-day pleasures, the other with torment and dread.

In 1734 Crébillon's son was imprisoned in Vincennes for writing a scandalous novel inspired by *The Thousand and One Nights*, entitled *Tanzai et Neandane*. Amongst the anecdotes he told his fellow members of Le Caveau was one about an unexpected cellmate, encountered early in his incarceration. Hearing strange noises, he'd spied a creature crawling around the cell. When it sat up on its hind legs, he took it for a cat, and reached out to offer it a piece of his dinner. But it wasn't a cat – it was a giant rat, nourished by the generosity of the previous occupant. The initial horror passed, and Crébillon junior developed a peculiar attachment to his verminous cellmate. When he left the prison, he admitted, 'I cannot deny that I parted from Raton with tears in my eyes.' Shuffling around the Crébillon household, Gabrielle-Suzanne would have heard many such tales. This one chimes with her storytelling, dramatising a prisoner's shift from distaste to companionship with the creature that shares his imprisonment.

The conditions of Vincennes may have been squalid (and certainly rat-infested), but the prison-castle played a significant role in eighteenth-century French literature. Not only did the Marquis de Sade write the first

draft of his erotic novel *Justine* (published 1791) here, but the philosopher Denis Diderot composed his seminal *Letter on the Blind* (published 1749) inside its dank walls – a radical philosophical treatise examining the relativity of knowledge and questioning the existence of God.

These are significant works in the history of literary freedom, and their composition while in this chateau is striking. Imprisonment can provoke reflections on the meaning of liberty, as it does for one of Gabrielle-Suzanne's heroines, in her fairy tale 'Mirliton'.[FN2] But Vincennes also happened to be a prison whose inmates enjoyed surprising freedoms. Pierre Ernst I of Mansfeld, incarcerated here in the sixteenth century, was able to bring along his valet and cook as well as a jester and even a parrot. Which brings us back to Belle, wandering the corridors of her fictional prison, accompanied by opera-singing parrots and monkeys dressed as Spanish courtiers. Does any fairy tale evoke the ambiguity of imprisonment more strikingly than the one about the captive who marries her captor?

Belle's submission may be hard for modern readers to swallow. The tale is routinely trounced as an early case of Stockholm syndrome.[FN3] But that interpretation overlooks its pioneering role in the discourse of female eroticism: a story channelled by many women writing in the nineteenth century (such as George Sand in her 1837 romance *Mauprat*, and the gothic masterpieces of the Brönte sisters a decade later, with their brooding anti-heroes and heroines wandering the corridors of mysterious buildings), it continues to influence female-authored fiction today.

Whether Belle is gazing at her dream lover's portrait – 'How much time she spent admiring him!' – or giving herself over to 'the pleasure of dreaming of her attractive lover', this is a story about a heroine's sexual awakening. Her ideal lover isn't confined to her dreams, but eventually appears in bodily form, lying beside her in bed; and at the sight of him Belle 'did not fear scandalizing anyone by the liberties she might take with him' and 'kissed him a thousand times'.

Tame as these glimpses of sexual assertiveness may seem today, many of our raunchiest contemporary takes on the female libido are indebted to 'Beauty and the Beast' (think E. L. James's *Fifty Shades* novels, with the heroine submitting to her beastly BDSM-fixated boss; or Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* series, with 'Bella' imprisoned by her love for a moody vampire; or, more directly, Sarah J. Maas's bestselling *A Court of Thorns*

and Roses, in which the heroine, abducted to a fairy kingdom by a golden-furred 'beast', finds herself 'yielding completely to the writhing wildness that had roared alive inside me'). The powerful sexual tension between freedom and restriction, oozing in each of these descendants, is inscribed in Gabrielle-Suzanne's original, where Belle hungers to see the prince of her dreams, 'a joy that she would have bought at the price of her liberty, and even all the pleasures that surrounded her'.

There's a significant difference, however, between these later versions and Gabrielle-Suzanne's; a difference that neatly deflects the Stockholm syndrome argument. The Beast and the Prince may be the same person, but that doesn't mean they're the same. The original Belle *doesn't* fall in love with the Beast. She pities him, she's grateful for the riches he's heaped on her family, she grows to like him. But love? That's for the handsome dreamboat. It's *because* man and beast don't share any commonality for the pre-Darwinian, eighteenth-century reader that the curse is so shocking. Why fall for a yucky beast when you can have the man of your dreams – literally?

Which is why the 'transformation' in the original tale is only partial: the Prince has been cursed into the form of a beast, but he wears the role like a mask, warned by the wicked fairy that he is 'doomed if you dare to make use of your wit to please in conversation'. For his own hope of salvation, he must act *bête*, or 'stupid'. It's hard to think of a more humiliating fate for an eighteenth-century Frenchman. Civilised manners were the pride of the milieu, and French identity is still filtered through its values today. The thrill of inner wildness would be another age's discovery.

Some of these thoughts were in my mind as I made my way back from Vincennes and shuffled through the Gare de Lyon. A couple on a scooter were wheeling down the corridor between the concourses. Along the walls, workmen were installing reproductions of nineteenth-century orientalist paintings. The couple's arms entwined on the handlebars, and they slowed down for a moment, taking in the paintings, then turned to each other for a kiss. For a few seconds a camel's golden fleece flowed into the boy's hair.

As I made my way past them, I imagined the decades and centuries peeling backwards. I could see these lovers in the sixties, arms winding around the handlebars of a Vespa, knees meeting under the half-hood of a nineteenth-century barouche, all the way back to Gabrielle-Suzanne's

time, sitting in an early cabriolet, rattling down the rue de Richelieu towards the Tuileries Gardens.

Love translates across the centuries, and so does ‘Beauty and the Beast’. Romantic, expressionist, Jungian symbolist, postmodernist, gay liberation, YA neo-noir, it keeps crossing the barriers erected between the ages. Transformation, after all, has no limit to its guises.

The Tale of the Naiads

In a land not far from China, a king and his daughter are forced to flee from a coup. Hiding in a forest, they shelter with a former slave, Richarde, and her ugly daughter, Piegreche. While the king naively submits to Richarde's manipulations and marries her, his daughter, Lisimene, is forced to do all the chores. Tormented by the vindictive Piegreche, she pines for the old palace life, and relief comes one day when she falls into a fountain while rescuing a small child.

Opening her eyes in an underwater crystal vault, Lisimene is astonished to find herself tended by water fairies – or 'Naiads'. They lace her into a fragrant-smelling multicoloured dress, coif her with flowers, and give her several useful accessories: a crystal crook that tends the flock, a spinning-wheel that spins by itself, and a beaver that tidies the house.

Back in the forest, Piegreche continues to bully Lisimene, ordering her to harvest pears and sell them in the nearby town. On her way there, she encounters a handsome huntsman, and he is smitten. Piegreche, frothing with jealousy, disguises herself as Lisimene, but all she gets is a kicking from the huntsman's companions. Maddened with resentment, she goads her mother to betray the dethroned king's whereabouts, and the usurper's spies descend on their shelter. Everyone ends up at the court, except for Lisimene, who manages to escape.

Now the huntsman reveals that he's the usurper's son. He's much more virtuous than his father, however, and refuses to condone his behaviour. For this, he is sentenced to die along with the king, but a flood sweeps over the gibbets and the shocked usurper sees the condemned king and prince riding back to the court, along with Princess Lisimene and several female gnomes. The latter reveal that the huntsman is actually the son of the king's poisoned brother, murdered by the usurper, who anticipates the penalty for his crimes by stabbing himself.

All is set for Princess Lisimene to marry her 'perfect' groom, but the vindictive Richarde lights a magic candle intended to kill her. Instead, it kills her own daughter, Piegreche, and the horrified mother hurls herself

out of a window. At last, all enemies have been dealt with, the king devotes himself to repose, and Lisimene marries Prince Perfect, who takes over the reins of the kingdom to general acclamation.

Chapter 9

Monkey Business

Thirty miles north of Paris, the Age of Enlightenment meets *Planet of the Apes*. Inside the Château de Chantilly, behind the doors of the Great and Small *Singerie* (or 'Monkey House'), a simian soldier in a tricone grips a sword. Another monkey tightropes on a curtain cord, wielding a ceremonial stick under a pink cravat, while blue ribbons flutter at its knee joints. There are monkeys beating drums, monkeys shading themselves under umbrellas, monkeys playing cards, monkeys bathing themselves and monkeys drinking chocolate. A couple of monkeys perfume a lady in a feathered headdress, another presents a lady with a letter, and a particularly diligent monkey is painting a porcelain vase.

The monkeys may be confined to wall panels, frolicking between golden filigree frames and intertwining flowers, but the artwork was commissioned by the Bourbon-Condé family, who kept monkeys as pets. Given the date of the panels, which were painted in the 1730s by the artist Christophe Huet (not to mention the role of the Bourbon-Condés as patrons of Crébillon), to look upon these panels is to peek at the aristocratic grotesqueries that fed Gabrielle-Suzanne's imagination.

It's there in many of her tales: in the underwater crystal vault of 'The Naiads', with their silvery gauze dresses and strange gifts, such as a house-cleaning beaver who goes by the name of Diligent; or in the tale of 'Papa-Joli', in which a king is transformed into 'the most beautiful little dog in the world' and sleeps at the foot of a beautiful princess's bed. But it's there, most of all, in 'Beauty and the Beast'.

From the clock singing Belle's name to the parrots asking for a kiss, the theriomorph's palace shimmers with wonderful sights, and none is as crazily charming as the 'troop of monkeys, of all sizes: big ones, small ones, capuchin monkeys, monkeys with human faces, others with blue, green, black or golden beards' who 'performed rope-dances and

acrobatics', clad themselves in court costumes and 'picked up her dress and served her as pages'. Not only do they attend Belle, but a group of them performs a play, making 'gestures appropriate to the words of their roles, which the parrots pronounced quite distinctly and appositely . . .' Whether or not Gabrielle-Suzanne's courtier monkeys were inspired directly by those contemporary panels at Chantilly, she was drinking from the same fountain as the artist who painted them.

The Age of Exploration had filled Paris with exotic sights for several generations – from the strange beasts presented at Versailles to the trick-playing creatures touting for coins at the fairs. Gabrielle-Suzanne knew all about this: a relative, Jean Barbot, had been a famous explorer (as well as a commercial agent on slave-ships), writing about his travels to Guinea in a bestselling memoir published in 1732; and she'd sold her estate to a man who directed the Compagne des Indes. She lived in a world that measured its wealth, in part, by the luxuries it culled from the East (hence the jerboas presented at Versailles a few years earlier by Hanna Dyab).

This new world of voyage and enterprise is evoked by the frame tale in which 'Beauty and the Beast' is narrated. A young Creole woman is returning to her family's plantation and, bored by the sea journey, asks her chambermaid to tell her a story. Gabrielle-Suzanne's geography may sometimes be hazy, but her fictional world is in perpetual motion, chartering ships between the continents, bringing back tales of wonders and exotic luxuries.

But products aren't necessarily the same as power. The surreal elements in Gabrielle-Suzanne's fiction reflect a class in trouble, squeezed between monarchical absolutism and the rise of the merchant class. The Beast, courting Belle with magical gifts but locked in the castle by a curse, echoes the real-world aristocracy, stupefying itself with flamboyant delights while real power trickled away.

Class was an obsession for Gabrielle-Suzanne. Her ambiguous treatment of this theme is what gives her fiction its uneasy depth. Her first novella, *The Conjugal Phoenix*, shows a romance between a secret marquis and a laundress's daughter. When she discovers her husband is a marquis, 'as much as this information would have flattered certain women, Madame d'Oligny received this event as the cruellest thing that could happen', knowing that his family would wish to break them up. Similarly, in *The Gardener of Vincennes* (Gabrielle-Suzanne's very successful late novel),

love seems to transcend class when a young marquis falls for a beautiful vegetable seller: ‘with so many charms,’ he declares, ‘you deserve to be in the most distinguished rank.’ In this case, the heroine’s apparently low status proves to be an artifice, and she is restored to a life of luxury. The same restoration drives Gabrielle-Suzanne’s long fairy tale ‘The Naiads’, in which the prince (masquerading as a huntsman) declares to his beloved, believing her a mere shepherdess: ‘It is Destiny, and not you, that it is necessary to criticise, as it has not placed you at the rank where you ought to be.’

What life wouldn’t give her, Gabrielle-Suzanne bestowed on her characters. Losses are recovered thanks to individual fortitude and the involvement of fairies. So the Beast, in her most famous tale, regains his handsome princely appearance, and Belle also experiences a magical restitution. As a merchant’s daughter whose father has lost his wealth in a fire, she sees her family enriched by the Beast’s largesse. And at the end of the tale a conclave of fairies reveals – in a backstory excised from nearly every version of the tale ever since – that Belle herself is the daughter of a king.

As Gabrielle-Suzanne’s recent translator, the fantasy author Brian Stableford, put it to me: ‘The plots of both long works [“The Naiads” and “Beauty and the Beast”] presumably contain an element of wish-fulfilment fantasy particular to Madame de Villeneuve’s own unfortunate experiences.’ Many of her other stories match the same ‘wish-fulfilment fantasy’. But, in the process, they do something more. The logic of loss provokes a reassessment of the structures in which that loss occurred. When Belle’s suitability as a prince’s bride is questioned by the groom’s mother, another fairy points out: ‘do you think that princesses who are only so by the caprice of fortune merit the high rank in which fate has placed them any more than this young woman?’ The convenient revelation of Belle’s high-born fairy credentials may soften the barb of the question, but the question has been asked. Gabrielle-Suzanne was hardly clamouring for revolution, but her stories do reflect the world in which she lived.

‘Madame de Villeneuve is from the Age of Enlightenment,’ points out the actor-playwright Thierry Vincent (who produced a recent adaptation of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ in Nice, using Gabrielle-Suzanne’s original text), ‘and her novel is a true example of this period. It speaks of the merchants rising, the aristocracy declining, these ideas they were wrestling with at

that time. It is a universal story, of course, but it has something to say about the age in which it was made.' Plug our ears to Gabrielle-Suzanne's imagined worlds and we can hear the rattling of the bars in which the French class system had been imprisoned for so long. So gradual was the rattling that many didn't hear it, or not until it was too late, when the whole system burst apart in 1789.

The Mangy Wolf

But for most of the Parisian *beau monde* of the 1740s, life was still a glittering relay of parties and pranks. On 17 March 1741 the high-born François-Antoine Devaux wrote to his friend Madame de Graffigny about 'a dreadful fairy tale that I devoured. It's "Beast and Beauty": I found it most entertaining.' In her reply, Madame de Graffigny declared: 'what a heroic effort to find "Beauty and the Beast" charming. All of Paris is crazy about it. As for me, it entertained me thoroughly, and I don't find myself any more idiotic for it.'

There's a myth about 'Beauty and the Beast': that Gabrielle-Suzanne's original story didn't make waves, only surfing the tide of popular consciousness through later, more accessible versions. Although it's true that Gabrielle-Suzanne received some snooty reviews, her story wasn't ignored. Indeed, it was so successful that it provoked a peculiar hoax from a mischievous quarter of the *beau monde*.

As was common at the time, the tale had been printed in an illicit version with the author's name denoted by a string of asterisks.[FN1] But whenever a story attracted attention, a frantic search followed to unmask the author. 'Everyone is accusing Crébillon of it,' wrote Devaux, 'but I believe it, for while this dreadful tale entertained me a great deal because of its folly, and it takes a lot, no offence to the *beau monde* of Paris, I found it quite beautiful.'

These may not be the responses of a critics' darling, but they show the tale was being talked about. Which was certainly the case in the house of Jeanne Quinault, a retired actress turned salon hostess. If we could zoom in on her house, on the rue Saint-Anne, for a Monday evening gathering of her literary club, the Bout de Banc (End of the Bench), we'd see high and tailed wigs in disarray from skits and sing-songs, and frilled arms reaching

for glasses half filled with exotic liquors from the Americas. Crébillon junior is here, and so is Madame de Graffigny, who tells us in her letters the ‘dominant character’ was the ever-frowning Comte de Caylus, a man ‘excessively wicked out of love for the truth’. The Bout de Banc churned out many satirical productions, passed around for the entertainment of high society. Amongst them was a pair of parodic tales, ‘The Mangy Wolf’ and ‘The Old-Young Lady’. The burlesque story of a ‘scrub-brush fairy’ transformed into a wolf with a bad case of mange, living in a palace infested with fleas, not only lampooned ‘Beauty and the Beast’; it also poked fun at the living conditions of Crébillon’s animal-filled house.

In the foreword to their fairy tale burlesque, Quinault and her gang mocked Gabrielle-Suzanne as ‘famous for so many fortunate works in verse and prose’. Her stories had struck a chord. Feeling compelled to respond, she released her own tale about a prince transformed into a wolf, ‘Mirliton’, the following year, part of a collection called *The Solitary Beauties*. But she didn’t have the appetite for a long-running literary feud, and published no more fairy tales in her lifetime.

Instead, she focused her remarkably productive final years on fiction for adults. Four full-length novels appeared in the 1750s, of which *The Gardener of Vincennes*, which went through fifteen editions, was the most successful. By the publication of the latter, she was sufficiently confident in her success to note in the preface ‘the fortune that my previous works have had’. At the same time, she was keenly aware of her critics. ‘Although I dare not flatter myself that my style of writing has the brilliance and lightness of the works which are in fashion today,’ she wrote in one of her last works (published in 1756), ‘my self-respect and my book-seller have enough reason to be satisfied with the reception of the public’. In the same preface she noted that her books ‘had the fortune to please . . . and I count on putting before the press several others which are all ready.’

This is a mission statement from somebody with plans. But before those words were published time had already taken its due. A trickle of posthumous works would see the light of day, including her last novel, *The Memoirs of the Mademoiselles Marsange*, and a long fairy tale, ‘Time and Patience’, promised as far back as 1740 as the final segment of *The Young American* (the volume in which ‘Beauty and the Beast’ first appeared), which was published at last in 1768.

Judging by her intention to publish more work, her last illness was sudden and unexpected. She had lived to the age of seventy, and she died in a place of comfort. For Crébillon's household had long left behind the squalor of the rue de Maçon, transferring first to the highly respectable rue de Grenelle, and a few years later, enabled by the patronage of Madame de Pompadour, to an apartment in the aristocratic quarter of Le Marais. 'In commerce with many learned people,' wrote the literary biographer Jean-François de Lacroix in 1788, 'Monsieur de Crébillon *père* was, above all, singularly attached to her as long as he lived.'

Gabrielle-Suzanne was too reclusive for her death to provoke much comment, and it would be down to later writers to turn her greatest tale into a worldwide bestseller. Not that they wasted any time about it. Since 'Beauty and the Beast' had been published without a licence, it could be plagiarised with impunity. A French governess working in England, Jeanne-Marie Leprince de Beaumont, exploited this opportunity to abridge the story in her *Magasin des Enfants*, which was published the year after Gabrielle-Suzanne's death, in 1756. Cut and paste, and stitch a moral on to the end, and there's your bestseller: a version that would be swiftly translated into English, feeding the growing British appetite for children's fiction, leading to a string of retellings, stage adaptations and the famous film versions of the twentieth century by Jean Cocteau[FN2] and Disney, an afterlife that shows no sign of abating.

Think of 'The Little Mermaid' and we think of Hans Christian Andersen; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* – C. S. Lewis; *Harry Potter* – J. K. Rowling. This is hardly a mystery: we read these stories through the celebrated authors' original words. With 'Beauty and the Beast', on the other hand, we're more likely to be following Madame de Beaumont's abridgement. The latter used her own words, but the details of the narrative are replicated from Gabrielle-Suzanne's tale, like an image drawn on tracing paper. As Joseph de La Porte wrote a few years after Gabrielle-Suzanne's death, 'Madame de Beaumont only abridged it and changed some expressions; but the content is the same.'

The merchant sheltering from a storm, plucking a rose for his daughter from the arbour beside which he stabled his horse, the very spot in which the Beast accosts him; the Beast refusing to be addressed by any title, insisting the merchant bring one of his daughters willingly to the palace; the magic horse; the heroine's repulsion for the Beast evolving into tender

affection, her love saving him from death and transforming him into a handsome prince: there may be overlaps, but we don't find the same pattern of events in so-called ancient 'versions' like 'Cupid and Psyche', nor even in 'monster-groom' tales of the late seventeenth century like 'The Ram'. Even features we instinctively attribute to later editions were introduced by Gabrielle-Suzanne, such as the heroine's 'great liking for reading', the magic mirror and the singing clock. Fascinating as those other texts may be, and effective as Madame de Beaumont's abridgement proved, they shouldn't distract us from recognising Gabrielle-Suzanne's singular achievement as *the* author (not *an* author) of 'Beauty and the Beast'.

The Fortune to Please

Thirteen years old is hardly the age – certainly for boys – to go all out for an animated Disney musical. But on an outing to the Bournemouth Odeon in 1991, I still chose to watch *Beauty and the Beast*, the Disney mega-hit, over *Lethal Weapon 3*, much to the disgust of my more streetwise friends. It took a while to get into it, but by the end we were all nodding our heads to 'Tale as old as time', goggling at the hyperactive bling and the dancing crockery, Belle's incredibly narrow waist and the marvellous bookshelves she swung her ladder along, and most of all the Beast, his tail swinging behind him, his mane tied back in a ponytail with a blue ribbon that matched his frock coat. Although they weren't exactly gushing, I think my friends forgave me for tipping the choice towards a fairy tale cartoon.

Like plenty of other Disney adaptations, this one was so dominant it seemed to scrub out the written tale. The film credits listed more than thirty writers for the storyline, script development and dialogue, but there wasn't a single mention of the original author. It was as if the animators had invented the tale from scratch.

The same anonymity continues to hang over the story like a concealing mist, spread by a combination of critical miserliness and historical blindness. But every so often a voice calls through the fog, pointing the original author out. 'Justice has not been done to her work,' declared none other than Madame de Beaumont – the very person who plagiarised her – in the 1750s. In the mid nineteenth century James Robinson Planché (who

played a key role in popularising *Beauty and the Beast* on the Victorian stage) wrote: ‘Madame de Beaumont has merely the merit of having cut this admirable work down to the smallest comprehensible dimensions, and made a pretty little nursery tale of one of the most ingeniously constructed stories in the whole catalogue of fairy chronicles.’ More recently, a few academics and translators have worked to bring attention to her work, such as the editor Elias Biancardi and the fantasy author Brian Stableford, who has translated several of her stories and hailed her as ‘a pioneer who lay groundwork on which countless future writers were to build, and whose endeavours remain enjoyable as well as fascinating’. And on a warm afternoon in early 2020, in the old town of Nice, I took my seat in a studio theatre to watch a live adaptation of the story billed as ‘based on the story by Madame de Villeneuve’, with many of Gabrielle-Suzanne’s eighteenth-century phrases used in the script.

Aside from exceptions like these, she remains sidelined, not only ghosted by film adaptations but pushed aside even by studies of her famous tale.[FN3] And yet Gabrielle-Suzanne still has, to use her words, ‘the fortune to please’. Of all the literary classics produced in eighteenth-century France, can anything else match the popular legacy of ‘Beauty and the Beast’? Not bad for an ‘old shrew’ with a ‘facility for making mediocrities’.

If it took a little time for Gabrielle-Suzanne to recover from her life’s early tribulations, our next teller was narrating future classics from an early age. Not that she found the rewards pouring into her lap. Like Gabrielle-Suzanne, she would have to learn the value of patience. For, as the Frenchwoman declared in her final fairy tale, ‘I can say that in general Time and Patience are the masters of all.’

Which could almost be a slogan for the slow-cooking life of Dortchen Wild, the teller to whom we now turn . . .

PART FOUR

The Girl from the Golden Sun

As she began to sing, Roland recognized her right away, jumped up, and said that she was his true bride, and he didn't want anyone else but her. So he married her, and her sorrows came to an end while her joy began to thrive.

'Sweetheart Roland', narrated by Dortchen Wild to Wilhelm Grimm, 19 January 1812

The Tale of the Six Swans

A widowed king marries a witch. In order to spare his children from her spells, he hides them in a forest – six sons and a daughter. But the witch-queen spies them out and uses enchanted shirts to turn the boys into swans. Only the daughter avoids this sorcery, so she wanders the forest searching for her brothers until she finds them in a robbers' den. For a quarter of an hour every day they turn back into humans, which is how she is able to locate them. But an awful lot of hard work is needed to shatter the spell: she must neither speak nor laugh for six years, and she must sew them each a shirt made out of asters.

Having gathered these star-shaped flowers, she's sitting up a tree sewing the first shirt when some hunters pass by. Since she isn't allowed to speak, she answers their entreaties by throwing down a golden necklace, hoping it will satisfy them, then her girdle and garters, and eventually the rest of her clothes until she is down to nothing but her shift. If she thought they'd leave her alone, she's very much mistaken: they pull her down from the tree and take her to their leader, who is a king and owns this forest. Unable to answer his questions due to her vow, she looks at him in silence. The king is smitten, and has her carried back to his palace.

Now she is queen, but the king's mother is suspicious of this dumb daughter-in-law, and determined to be rid of her. So when she gives birth, her mother-in-law smears blood on her face and takes away the baby, and does this three times.

Condemned as a cannibal who eats her own children, she is sentenced to burn, and arrives at the stake on the last day of the six years since her brothers were transformed. She has nearly finished the six shirts – only a single sleeve remains to be sewn. There is no time to complete the last item. As the fire is lit, she looks up at the sky and sees six swans flying towards her. She throws the shirts over them, turning them back into her brothers; only the youngest has a swan's wing where the sleeve was incomplete. Now able to speak, she declares her innocence. Her babies are

brought out of hiding, her mother-in-law is burned in her place, and she lives the rest of her days in peace and happiness.

Chapter 10

Dortchen Wild

‘Kind’, they called her, ‘self-sacrificing’, with a ‘pure, loving heart’. Henriette Dorothea Wild – known to friends and family as Dortchen – tiptoes out of history like one of the heroines her own storytelling helped to entrench: a sweet blonde skivvy with really long hair, who keeps her mouth shut and does whatever Papa tells her.

Here are a few incidents from the tales she narrated: a young woman with blood greased across her lips is accused of eating her own babies; a witch gets burned in an oven by the children she was planning to cook; a newly married woman opens a forbidden chamber to discover the limbs of her slain sisters, blood dripping into the basin below.

There’s a striking tension here, between the gentle woman who emerges from history and the dark tales she told. Hidden for two centuries in the shadow of the most influential family firm in literary history – the remarkable Brothers Grimm – Dortchen Wild is beginning to take a few tentative steps into the light. Scholarly ingenuity has enabled us to identify which tales were narrated by which teller,[FN1] with further light being shed by illuminating correspondence; and in 2013 her life was the subject of a beautiful novel.

It was no sugary idyll, with its fair share of family tragedies, including the early deaths of several siblings as well as of her first-born, and the loss of both her parents by the age of twenty-one. But Dortchen did live a kind of fairy tale. Not only did she narrate some of the tales that would count among the world’s most beloved (including ‘Rumpelstiltskin’, ‘The Elves and the Shoemaker’ and – probably – ‘Hansel and Gretel’), she ended up marrying the man who jotted down her tales, and lived with the brothers as the closest witness of their success. Long rendered voiceless like the nameless heroine of ‘The Six Swans’, she is able, increasingly, to speak to

us. And if we turn our ears towards her, we might just hear what she's saying.

The Kassel Club for Storytellers

An autumn evening in 1811, inside the medieval walls of Kassel in the region of Hesse. Lamp-lighting time, when darkness falls like a mantle over the steeply pitched roofs and projecting eaves, and the sedan-chair-bearers have to keep a lookout in case they're brained by falling tiles. Demons and other supernatural figures cling to the gables, carved and painted between the timber frames and stucco mouldings. Glistening under the light from a bracketed lantern, a Golden Sun wheels around the sign for an apothecary store, above the candlelit glow spilling out of the door.

A pharmacist is always in demand, and Rudolf Wild is busy behind the counter, cursing the black cat slinking between his legs, handing over pillboxes and ointments wrapped in the muslin bags hemmed by his daughters. In the cabinets behind him are powdered mandrake and bottles of belladonna, pine tincture for the lungs and oak-leaf poultices for haemorrhoids. If anybody knows the value of the forest, surely it's an apothecary. But Herr Wild isn't interested in tales about magical happenings among the trees. He puts up with enough of that sort of thing from his daughters.

So narrow is Marktgasse, in places it's only five metres wide, so there's not much chance of avoiding your neighbours. Which is a problem for Herr Wild. He has high hopes for his six daughters. He'd like to marry them off to well-born high-earners, not pfennig-pinchers like the Grimm brothers on the other side. So he wouldn't be pleased to know where his daughters frequently gather. But if we tiptoe away from the Golden Sun, cross the street and climb the stairs to a second-floor apartment, there we can see them.

We close our eyes against the sting of smoke and open them on a modest but homely scene. A coffee pot hangs from a chain over the hearth. Beside it, Lotte Grimm, the hard-worked younger sister of the family, is grinding some beans on a table. A half-eaten loaf of rye bread rests between an ink pot and a smouldering meerschaum pipe; pewter bowls mingle with library books and the screeds on which the borrowers have

been copying out the texts. This is the home of the Grimms – Jacob and Wilhelm, as well as their brothers Carl, Ludwig and Ferdinand, although rarely all of them together. Scattered around the benches, they keep the merry atmosphere going, encouraging their visitors to share their tales.

'Please, Dortchen,' says Wilhelm. Lanky, pale-faced, he sits with his knees against the table, beads of sweat glistening under the dark curl of his fringe: 'Begin the story.'

The girl facing him is the apothecary's second youngest daughter: eighteen years old, with small blue eyes in a face nearly as pale as Wilhelm's, her dark blonde hair bundled into braids at the back of her head, cascading over her prominent cheeks in delicate ringlets, over the high collar of her dress. She pinches her small, thin lips around the lines of her tale, beguiling everyone with her story.

'*Es war einmal* . . . Once there was a shoemaker who had become so poor that he had nothing, except leather enough for only one single pair of shoes . . .'

The Grimms may have struggled to scratch a few thalers together, and their refreshments could hardly compete with the Marquise de Lambert's Parisian salon in the 1690s or the Academy of Idlers in Giambattista Basile's Naples. But in the history of fairy telling there was never a more significant literary club. For those cramped conclaves on Marktgasse were the raw material for the most famous of all fairy tale collections: *Kinder und Hausmärchen* or *Children's and Household Tales*, assembled from 1806 onwards and first published in 1812. More than a dozen of the tales (and possibly as many as twenty) were narrated by Dortchen Wild, nearly a fifth of the first volume, including many that would become iconic.

The Grimms might be known for fairy tales, but they didn't invent their tales – they collected them. Except . . . well, there is *one* tale, hinted in their writings and adopted by their followers, which would have a profound effect on story collectors around the world, as well as on emerging ideas about German nationalism.

'Aside from a few exceptions that we have noted, almost everything has been collected from oral traditions in Hesse and Main and in the Kinzig regions of the Duchy of Hanau, where we grew up,' wrote the brothers in the introduction to the first edition. Furthermore, they claimed, the motivation to collect these tales was driven by the age of the tellers, who 'are becoming more and more scarce'.

A legend grew around the brothers, as story-questers, digging tales out of the hills and valleys, bottling magic from the lips of dying crones and herdsmen. In the age of the Romantics, it was an appealing image. There was just one snag . . .

It was a load of cobblers.

When the Grimms said they ‘collected from oral traditions’, what this meant in reality was that they heard the tales in the parlour of their poky apartment, or in the various summer houses and front rooms of their middle-class acquaintances. And far from being at death’s door, most of their tellers were in their teens and early twenties. Of the eighty-six tales printed in the first volume of *Children’s and Household Tales*, more than fifty were narrated by young women under the age of twenty-five.

Sometimes our spotlight falls on collectors, like Giambattista Basile, sometimes on inventors of tales, like Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, and sometimes on the forgotten figures who passed the tales on. ‘She is warm, natural, intelligent and cheerful,’ declared Wilhelm Grimm, ‘takes pleasure in the world and is ready at any moment to give it up for something higher and better’: the kind of woman who could keep her lips sealed for several years while weaving magical shirts for the brothers she loved. But in Dortchen’s case, the brothers were the ones across the road, and the shirts were the stories she narrated, enabling them to stride across the world as kings in the realm of fairy telling.

Under the Ogre’s Boots

Although Kassel boasts its own fairy tale-turreted castle, constructed as a love nest for the elector’s mistress in the late eighteenth century, and a statue of Hercules posing above the Schlosspark, it’s an industrial city, which is why the RAF pounded it in 1943. Some 180,000 tons of bombs, as well as 460,000 magnesium fire sticks, launched a firestorm that did away with the Old Town where Dortchen spent the first three and a half decades of her life. Not only was Marktgasse destroyed, but the State Library lost nearly all its books.

Enduring interest in the Grimms’ fairy tales has ensured they aren’t forgotten in Kassel. Aside from a bronze statue of the brothers, rubbing shoulders over a flowerbed, there’s a multimedia museum called Grimm World, where you can yell old German swear words into a giant trumpet

that hurls them back at you (there's something surprisingly therapeutic about being heckled as an *ärschlein*, a few moments after being screamed at by Red Riding Hood's granny and choosing whether the witch in the gingerbread house should wear a toad on her head, or an owl). But, for all the enterprise of the German museum industry, Kassel doesn't offer the historical wormhole that Naples does for readers of Giambattista Basile. It's elsewhere – in the steep, cobbled university town of Marburg, where the brothers studied law, and Steinau, a village of painted wooden gables in which their childhood home still boasts its ornamented timberwork and a carved head above the door they used to pelt with snowballs – that you find yourself be-Grimmed.

Dortchen was twelve years old when the brothers moved into Marktgasse. The death of their father in 1796 had left the Grimms in a precarious financial position. Forced out of their large house in Steinau, they moved to Kassel and took a second-floor apartment across the street from the apothecary shop. As Jacob complained in his autobiography, 'despite all the promises, we had never succeeded in gaining the slightest support, although our mother was a bailiff's widow and raised five sons for the state'. They had so little money they had to burn their furniture to keep themselves from freezing and survived on a single meal a day, and Lotte made the brothers' cravats by cutting up her dresses.

Dortchen's childhood had been less unsettled. The Wilds' large house behind the apothecary's shop had its own water supply and 'many hallways, stairways, floors and rear additions'. But her quiet homeland of Hesse was about to be swept up in grand events. In 1805, the same year the Grimms moved into Marktgasse, Napoleon defeated the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz, destroying the thousand-year-old Holy Roman Empire and setting the many German-speaking statelets in his sights. In the process he sparked the movement for German unification, which was fuelled by the growth of nationalism and the identity crisis provoked by the French occupation. This period was the high point of the Napoleonic Empire, when the diminutive Corsican was known across Europe as the 'Great Ogre'. The following year, 1806, the *Grande Armée* marched into Hesse and soldiers in cockaded hats poked their bayonets at the anxious residents of Kassel, demanding any goods they liked, with paper *assignats* as unreliable IOUs.

As an old lady living in Berlin in the 1860s, Dortchen could still remember her ritualised youth in Kassel, which she dictated in a series of precious fragments to her daughter Auguste. She recalled the pleasure of fixing a red and white rose to her confirmation dress, her grandmother being carried on a litter when she came to visit, the shiny tin stalls and waxed fruit of Kassel's Christmas market. Some of her memories shimmer like surreal moments in fairy tales – her blonde hair growing so long she disappeared underneath it and a schoolmistress insisted it had to be cut; a sister's pleasure at finding a lost ring shining in a cow pat; her terror when her father threatened – if she misbehaved – that he'd take her to the local dyer to be painted blue. Life was no paradise: there were always lots of chores to do, and she spent many evenings moulding candles or wrapping chocolate for the pharmacy. But with the arrival of Napoleon's army, everything became more complicated.

All her life, Dortchen remembered the *trum-trum-trum* of the military drums, the aggravation of French soldiers banging on the windows (which they did so aggressively that her sister Lisette once declared, 'I want to stab that swine!'). Kassel became the capital of Napoleon's kingdom of Westphalia, and the Great Ogre installed his brother Jérôme as its ruler. A dissolute bigamist, Napoleon junior was more interested in gambling and cockfighting than matters of state, and it was said that he bathed in red wine (which led to a local boycott, after a rumour spread that the royal bath wine was being rebottled by the local vintners). As *corsetières* and sellers of oriental spices set up shop among traditional chandlers and barrel makers, as tradespeople grumbled about the new measuring systems and the socially ambitious adopted French fashions, the educated citizens of Kassel were forced to submit to King Jérôme's court for employment.

Amongst them was Jacob Grimm, who was appointed court librarian in 1806. It wasn't the most obvious portfolio, given that King Jérôme wasn't particularly noted for his love of reading.[FN2] On the plus side, the new role gave Jacob access to books and plenty of time to pursue his own interests – and more importantly a salary. Less welcome were the mandatory hair-styling (powdered and tied back in a ponytail, in the style of the French court), the constant eavesdropping of Jérôme's secret police and the disquieting prospect of being called up to fight in Napoleon's army (he was put forward for the army lottery but drew a 'free number', to great relief in the Grimm household). Even more frustrating – and a major

driver behind Jacob's own scholarly activity – was the replacement of German law by French law. Under his beloved university tutor in Marburg, Karl von Savigny, Jacob had developed a deep appreciation for the organic connection between jurisprudence and language, an interest that extended to many of his projects, from the collection of folk tales to the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (*German Dictionary*), on which he would toil with his brother for many years.

Wilhelm was less suited to public work. Ever since a childhood bout of scarlet fever, he had been constrained by his fragile constitution. He was dependent on pills and powders, and subjected to cutting-edge medical procedures like electromagnetic therapy or the inhalation of burning mercury. 'Many nights I spent sleepless,' he recalled in his autobiography, 'sitting upright without moving, waiting for the grey light of day which always seemed to bring me some consolation.'

It was in this context, of personal and professional struggle, that the brothers began noting down stories, with the aim of assembling the definitive collection of German folk tales. 'Those days of the collapse of all previously existing establishments,' Wilhelm later wrote, 'will always be unforgettable for me . . . we did not only seek consolation in the past, but we hoped naturally that this work of ours would contribute somewhat to the return of a better day.' The personal and the political were united: the loss of their father and financial stability coincided with the loss of Hessian independence. So it's no wonder the Grimms pursued their project with patriotic zeal as well as personal passion.

The collection of folk tales was initially coordinated with an older writer, Clemens Brentano, who the brothers had met through Jacob's Marburg tutor, Karl von Savigny. Brentano had already produced a folk song collection called *The Boy's Magic Horn: Old German Songs* (published 1805–8), in collaboration with another writer, Achim von Arnim, and the brothers contributed to its final volumes. But Brentano and von Arnim backed away from the folk tale project to concentrate on their own writings, giving the brothers some stories and introducing them to a publisher.

Their aims were clear from the outset. In 1811, in an 'Appeal to all Friends of Old German Poetry and History', Jacob wrote: 'A society has been founded that is intended to spread throughout all of Germany and has as its goal to save and collect all the existing songs and tales that can be

found among the common German peasantry . . .' Collecting from villages was the aim, from 'shepherds, fishermen, miners' as well as 'old people, women, and children, who keep the tales fresh in their memories'.

This manifesto makes for curious reading. It reflects not so much the brothers' working method as the myth that would cling to them, holding tight like thistles on a thick woollen coat. Steeped in romantic notions of storytelling, they attributed the stories to the *Volk*, the people of the nation. They weren't trying to deny the original tellers credit – they believed in an organic connection between land and *Volk*; they were looking for communal rather than individual tales. But the net effect was to obscure the young women who became their principle contributors, who would remain unrecognised for more than a century and a half.

By the time Jacob had written the appeal, they had already collected dozens of tales. Dortchen's mother and her older sister Gretchen were two of their earliest sources, but Dortchen's involvement would eclipse the rest of her family. She was especially active in the two years leading up to the publication of the first volume of the *Children's and Household Tales*, from her recitation of 'Rumpelstiltskin' on 10 March 1811 to 'All-Kinds-of-Fur' on 9 October 1812, a mere two months before the first volume was published. She was still very young at this stage (which explains why she didn't emerge even earlier in the project). When she narrated her earliest known tales to the Grimms she was fifteen, and by the time she told her version of 'Rumpelstiltskin', in 1811, she was seventeen. Not that she was much younger than the others. Jacob was twenty-two when the first volume was published, Wilhelm twenty-one; many of their sources were teenagers.

Which brings us back to the salons. Reminiscing many years later, Ludwig Hassenpflug, who eventually married Lotte Grimm and whose sisters contributed many iconic tales, wrote: 'we always met there in their apartment in the Marktstrasse next to the Wild apothecary and spent very cheerful evenings there.' This is a significant and often overlooked aspect of the project: the stories were told in a social context, in meetings between young unmarried men and women. Wilhelm and Jacob weren't scratching their quill pens as the tales were being told. The transcriptions were made later ('in the summer house', 'in the garden', according to the annotations that Wilhelm scribbled in the margins of an early proof).

When the tales were initially narrated, the brothers were hosts and *compères*, encouraging the girls to entertain them with their tales.

'We have tried to grasp and interpret these tales as purely as possible,' insisted Jacob and Wilhelm in their preface to the first published edition: 'No incident has been added or embellished and changed.' When we read tales like 'The Six Swans' or 'All-Kinds-of-Fur' in the first edition, we are tantalisingly close to Dortchen's original recitals. 'You can really hear the teller and their personality', says Jack Zipes, translator of the Grimms and a longstanding interpreter of their tales. Reading these early versions, we are eavesdropping, as far as it's possible, on a girl spinning tales to a boy more than two centuries ago.

On 19 January 1812 Dortchen told Wilhelm some tales 'by the oven in the garden house' belonging to her married sister Hanne in Nentershausen, thirty-three miles from Kassel. There, in a little hut with just a porcelain stove to keep them warm, she narrated 'The Six Swans', 'Sweetheart Roland' and 'The Singing Bone'. Given how rarely his poor health allowed him to travel, Wilhelm's journey to Nentershausen suggests that he placed considerable value on Dortchen, or on her tales, or both. Lutheran modesty notwithstanding, it's hard to imagine there wasn't some kind of sexual undercurrent flowing between them as they sat together in the summer house: an unchaperoned girl aged eighteen and a boy aged twenty. And given their tastes, the grisly details (a bone singing the fate of a murdered brother, drops of speaking blood deceiving a witch, the flower-stitching mute princess smeared with blood by her vindictive mother-in-law) wouldn't necessarily have stifled that feeling. As for the treetop striptease in 'The Six Swans', we can only imagine frail Wilhelm's racing heart rate as he tried to keep his quill steady!

For anybody in doubt that loins were being stirred while lines were being scrawled, here's the clincher: why was it only Dortchen who told her tales in the intimate settings of those summer houses? The conclusion is more than just a supposition. Dortchen had admitted her crush on Wilhelm in a letter to his sister Lotte,[FN3] and the feeling was reciprocated, for they ended up sharing their lives together. But before the marriage knot could be tied, they would have to pass a few obstacles – as with any tale worth the telling.

How to Survive a Flop

The Grimms collected more than two hundred tales, from a wide range of sources. These included a retired dragoon watch master who exchanged his stories for trouser leggings, an old woman in a poorhouse in Marburg and a friend who was told the tale of ‘The Crows’ while serving at the Danish frontier, by a fellow soldier who was shot dead the next day.

There were many contributors, each with an intriguing background of their own. But if we zoom in on the most iconic stories, the ones for which the Grimms are remembered today, we find two families at the heart of the collection. These were the Wilds, Dortchen’s family, and the Hassenpflugs. The latter were three sisters – Marie, Jeanette and Amalie – who between them provided twenty-eight stories for the first edition, including ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, ‘Sleeping Beauty’ and ‘Snow-White’. The family’s storyteller-in-chief was Marie. A frail girl with dark eyes and delicate Beidermeier ringlets, she had a habit of fainting and a knack for telling grisly tales involving lots of amputated limbs. In Wilhelm’s words, she ‘has something quite charming and intelligent about her’.

Daughters of a court judge and government official, the Hassenpflugs were Huguenots whose ancestors had fled France during the persecution of the Protestants under Louis XIV. Along with their French heritage and language (which they spoke at dinner times), they had brought with them the French *contes de fées*, especially the stories of Charles Perrault and the Baroness d’Aulnoy, and many of their stories were adapted from those French versions, relocating them in German forests and adding extra dollops of blood.

Here is the stinging irony at the heart of the *Children’s and Household Tales*: many of the most popular tales, in a collection consciously gathered ‘to salvage what was left of the priceless national resources’, in the words of Jacob Grimm, ‘still in the hands of the German folk’, were indebted to the very nation whose occupation had given that project so much urgency. Small wonder the brothers spared so little credit for this important storytelling family.

If they had to point out their sources, old village women made more sense. After all, weren’t these the people mentioned in their appeal? In that respect, ‘Old Marie’ looks like a clear candidate for attention. Real name

Marie Muller, she was a widow in her sixties who lived with the Wilds in their house behind the Golden Sun. A pious Lutheran, who encouraged the girls to pray whenever there was a thunderstorm, she kept birds under her bed to fend off the vermin and had a penchant for storytelling. ‘From her,’ wrote Dortchen’s son Hermann, ‘the first volume of the tales got its most beautiful tales . . . One instantly felt that Dortchen and Gretchen probably only broadcast what Old Marie had taught them.’ Dortchen had an especially close relationship with Marie. Many years later, when the old nurse was on her deathbed, she was summoned for one last visit. Dortchen travelled through a perilous winter to reach her, and according to her daughter Auguste, ‘the old woman was so indescribably happy that it brought her back to life’.

The absence of ‘Old Marie’ from the brothers’ annotations suggests that Hermann was probably right, and her stories were retold through Dortchen rather than being narrated directly to the Grimms. Besides, the brothers had their own ‘Mother Goose’ figure – a villager to whom they devoted a detailed description in their second volume (published in 1815). Dorothea Viehmann was a tailor’s widow from nearby Niederzwehren who occasionally visited Kassel to sell fruit and vegetables. ‘She preserves the old traditions firm in her memory,’ wrote Wilhelm, ‘a gift, as she says, not granted to everyone and which many cannot retain. Withal she recreates her stories deliberately, surely, and in an unusually lively manner, taking pleasure herself in them; at first quite freely, then, if one desires, more slowly, so that after some practice one can take down her words.’

Viehmann’s stories were more representative of folk literature than those of the younger women – stories like ‘The Clever Farmer’s Daughter’, ‘Faithful Johannes’ and ‘The Little Peasant’, which illustrate the practical wisdom of the working classes. Some of her stories were more surreal, such as the extraordinary ‘Hans My Hedgehog’, in which a man with the bottom half of a human and the top half of a hedgehog plays bagpipes up a tree, rides a rooster, besieges a couple of castles, stabs a princess with his quills and marries another one. Viehmann’s stories are often remarkable, but they aren’t the ones for which the Grimms became famous.

Setting her contributions alongside the Hassenpflugs’ and Dortchen’s invites a striking suggestion. Had the Grimms followed through on their programme, collecting ‘earthy’ tales from the ‘folk’, they would have

produced a fascinating, authentic collection. But they wouldn't have become synonymous with fairy tales, and their stories would never have taken hold around the world. Young storytellers like Dortchen and Marie Hassenpflug were telling stories they had already enjoyed listening to. They gave the collection the popular appeal of stories that had already been vetted for entertainment value – by themselves.

No wonder the brothers were hoping for great success when the *Children's and Household Tales* were published in December 1812. But in the course of three years only nine hundred copies were sold. And they didn't even have the consolation of widespread critical acclaim. Following a pattern you may have noticed, the critics tucked in with their knives ready-sharpened. The collection was 'real junk', declared the classicist Heinrich Voß; and according to the historian Friedrich Rühs, it contained 'the most pathetic and tasteless material imaginable'. Although there was a sprinkling of more encouraging remarks, even some of the Grimms' closest collaborators were down on the book. Clemens Brentano, who had helped launch their story-collecting project, described the narration as 'negligent and slovenly' in a letter to a mutual friend: 'If the pious editors wanted to satisfy themselves, they should have preceded every story by a psychological biography of the child or of the old woman who at all events related it badly.'

It shows the brothers' resilience that they were able to respond to this glut of negativity. They did so by bringing out a second volume in 1815 and a second edition in 1819. They smoothed out the rough edges of the tales and stripped away some of the more controversial elements (such as the extramarital sex in 'Rapunzel' and the unpunished incestuous predation in 'All-Kinds-of-Fur'). Wilhelm was the chief architect of these changes, using his poetic skills to soften the tales and make them shine. Surely now, the brothers would reap their reward?

But despite all their efforts, sales of the second edition were even worse – only 137 copies were sold in the first year. It was a disaster, and it must have been hard to see how they could come back from it. From a commercial point of view, the Grimms were on the fast track to oblivion.

The Tale of All-Kinds-of-Fur

A king promises his dying wife he will never marry again unless he finds a woman who matches her beauty and her golden hair. But after several years have passed, he realises there's only one person who fits the bill: his daughter. To the shock of his councillors, and the distress of his daughter, he announces that he's going to marry her.

To hold off the dreaded day, his daughter demands various presents, each of them apparently impossible: a dress as gold as the sun, another as silver as the moon, and another as bright as the stars; as well as a cloak made out of a thousand different kinds of fur. However, the king is determined, and manages to fulfil her demands. There's only one thing for it: she will have to flee.

Packing her dresses inside a nutshell, covering her face in soot and wearing her cloak of all-kinds-of-fur, the princess hides in a forest. She is found by some passing huntsmen and taken to work in the kitchens of a palace, where she sweeps the floor and rakes the ashes, living a life of miserable drudgery.

But one day a feast is held. The girl, now known as 'All-Kinds-of-Fur' for the cloak she wears, cleans her face and puts on her dress as gold as the sun. She attends the feast and dances with the king. He wants to know her name, but she flees before he can find out, and returns to the kitchen. Still, she cannot avoid the king's attention. His suspicion is roused by the delicious soup she cooks; although when he summons her, she is unrecognisable in her soot and furry cloak, and insists that she is only good for throwing boots at.

If she hid away in the kitchen, perhaps she'd avoid him, but she can't resist dancing. When another feast takes place, she puts on her dress as silver as the moon; and at a third feast she wears her dress as bright as the stars. Each time, she escapes before the king can find out her name. But on the third occasion he slips a ring onto her finger, and when she's back in the kitchen, he summons her once again. Although she denies she's anybody special, he spots the ring and pushes her cloak aside, so that 'the

golden hairs came flowing out’. And so All-Kinds-of-Fur becomes the queen and they live happily ever after.

Chapter 11

The Apothecary's Daughter

Life under military occupation is hell. Dortchen never forgot the chanting of the French soldiers: 'Watch out farmer, I'm coming to take your cows and calves with me, and maybe I'll take you too!' When Napoleon suffered defeat to the Russians in 1812, losing half a million men in the carnage, liberation was short-lived. The Cossacks swept into Kassel, striding around town in bearskin coats, playing military airs on their mouth organs. Dortchen remembered the tunes so accurately she was able to play them on her piano many decades later. But the Cossacks were no more welcome than the French. Quarters were demanded in the Wilds' house, and the soldiers bunked down on straw mattresses, terrifying the family with the fires they sparked to repair their boots, and the casual way they dropped the smouldering stumps in the straw.

But for all the discomforts of occupation, it was amongst her own kin that Dortchen suffered the most. Here's a telling fact: all her sisters married between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two, except for Dortchen, who was thirty-two. Her younger sister Mimi was called upon to sing to visitors, Gretchen was admired for her beauty, and Lisette, who spoke the best French, acted as interpreter with the occupiers. Meanwhile, Dortchen lived in their shadows. She loved to listen to the sound of rain and the crunching of wheels on the cobbles outside, enjoyed reading and was known for her friendliness to the elderly.

Her mother, Dorothea, had a 'mild, cheerful' temperament, and Dortchen's memories of her were warm. When she died in 1813, Dortchen imagined the sun would never rise again. But now she had to look after her father, which could be a thankless task. She recalled that he was 'often grumpy'. This appears to have been an understatement: so notorious was his temper that her mother used to warn the girls of 'bad weather' when he was on the warpath. Judging by Dortchen's reminiscences, he was a

complex character. He was generous to the poor, accepting payment in kind from those who didn't have ready money, and distributing alms every Sunday from his living-room door; and he had a playful side, whether making animal designs out of sugar paper or drawing figures for his children with chalk.

His generosity was an expression of pride, but so was his rigid possessiveness. Socialising outside the family was off the table, and so reluctant was he to grant his daughters permission for excursions that they stopped asking him. While her other sisters chafed against his commands, and all found a way out of home, Dortchen stayed put. Certainly no rebel, she followed her father's draconian commands, caring for him with her characteristic diligence until he died on Christmas Day 1814. There was one exception to her obedience: however much he disapproved of the Grimms (she recalled that 'he didn't want to know about them, who were too learned for him and also considered mocking'), she carried on visiting them.

Dortchen's release from her father's clutch sets the scene for the opening chapter of *The Wild Girl* (published in 2013), a fictionalised account of Dortchen's life by the novelist Kate Forsyth, which imagines her as a victim of paternal abuse. 'I was rocked back on my heels,' said Forsyth, when I asked what it was like to come across Dortchen's story. 'I couldn't believe this young woman who had been so integral to the gathering of the tales, who had told so many of my favourite tales, and then ended up marrying Wilhelm, I just couldn't believe this story hadn't been told.'

Delving into her research, Forsyth studied the chronology, putting together a timeline of Dortchen's tale-telling before any scholar had done so, and in the process connected the tales with Dortchen's life. At the heart of this story was 'a tension between this sweet, gentle young woman and her telling these tales that contain a lot of violence and darkness and I think heartbreak as well'. This led Forsyth to the conclusion that Dortchen was a victim of sexual abuse, driven into an abyss of silence and self-loathing by her father. In her imagining, the tale of 'All-Kinds-of-Fur' (about a young woman escaping her incestuous predatory father) became a keystone.

The stories narrated by Dortchen certainly have some peculiar fathers. There's the greedy miller in 'Rumpelstiltskin', who endangers his

daughter by boasting she can spin straw into gold; the woodcutter in ‘Hansel and Gretel’, who leads his children into the forest to abandon them; not to mention the incestuous father in ‘All-Kinds-of-Fur’. ‘The stories we tell’, as Forsyth puts it, ‘are illuminating of our lives. Something drives us, connects us to these stories.’ Dortchen’s are the stories you’d expect from a young woman afraid of leaving home, who felt she had to stay long after her siblings had flown the nest. And despite all the strange and callous fathers who feature in these stories, only one of her heroines willingly escapes: the princess in ‘All-Kinds-of-Fur’, who disguises herself in a cloak of many furs to flee her father’s predation. At least, so we assume. There’s an unsettling lack of clarity in Dortchen’s original version: does she end up with another king, or has she returned to her incestuous father?

Macabre as they may be, Dortchen’s tales are certainly not pleasure-free zones. Many are spiced with humour, such as the short tale ‘Sweet Porridge’, in which a magic cooking pot keeps producing porridge until it engulfs a whole town and ‘whoever sought to go back into the town had to eat his way through’. Visual gags overlap with surreal imagery – the ridiculous costume of brightly coloured feathers worn by the escaping heroine of ‘Fitcher’s Bird’, the paper dress the heroine of ‘The Three Little Men in the Wood’ is forced to wear as she goes strawberry picking in wintertime, the ‘little house made of bread with cake for a roof and pure sugar for windows’ in ‘Hansel and Gretel’, which has evolved over time into the iconic gingerbread house. Dortchen’s tales have a knack for presenting images that stay with the reader long after we’ve finished turning the pages.

Of all her themes, the most revealing is industriousness. In more than half of the tales attributed to Dortchen, the heroine’s hard work is key to the narrative – from Gretel preparing the witch’s oven to the bed-making drudge of ‘Mother Hölle’, from the uncomplaining travellers in ‘Sweetheart Roland’ and ‘The Singing, Springing Lark’ to the miller’s daughter’s hopeless spinning in ‘Rumpelstiltskin’. In this respect, Dortchen’s tales are strikingly different from those of the storyteller who on the surface appears most similar to her: Marie Hassenpflug. The latter gives relatively little attention to work (Snow-White, famous these days for keeping house for the dwarves, isn’t described in the original version carrying out any of her chores). Which is just as you’d expect from the

well-off daughter of a government official. It's through these subtleties that we can see the tellers' lives pressing against the skin of their tales.

Many of these themes are shared across the Grimms' collection, but Dortchen's tales present them with particular intensity, suggesting the preoccupations that tugged at her imagination. Her heroines may be beautiful, but more tellingly, they are patient, hard-working and endlessly forgiving (in both 'Sweetheart Roland' and 'The Singing, Springing Lark', the heroines toil on in the face of male forgetfulness, until their efforts finally trigger their happy endings). These were qualities required in Dortchen's difficult home life; and they were equally necessary in order to enjoy happiness with the man to whom she gave her heart.

Whilst Dortchen remained unmarried, Wilhelm Grimm turned elsewhere. For a while, he was involved with the well-born lady Jenny Dröste-Hülshoff, who told him the fantastical tale of 'The Shoes That Were Danced to Pieces' and several other tales; and a temporary romance seems to have flared between them. But, although there were periods when they saw less of each other, the bond between Wilhelm and Dortchen remained unbroken.[FN1]

Which brings us to 1825, the year the Grimms' fortunes changed. A new edition of the tales was published, confined to fifty stories, carefully and poetically edited by Wilhelm, with evocative illustrations. This was the kind of edition that booksellers and their customers could handle (it was inspired, after all, by a translated edition that had been surprisingly successful in Britain, and used many of the same illustrations, as well as several new ones by Ludwig Grimm). Now the tales took off. Sales rose steadily, and soon rapidly. In the brothers' lifetime there would be ten editions of the 'Small Edition' and thirty-six editions by 1886. The *Kinder und Hausmärchen* would become the definitive fairy tale collection and a German publishing phenomenon that to this day has been outsold only by the Bible.

And another thing happened in 1825. In May of that year Wilhelm and Dörtchen became husband and wife.

'Someone Has to Marry'

‘When you left, I thought my heart would tear in two,’ wrote Wilhelm in 1805. ‘I couldn’t stand it. You certainly don’t know how much I love you.’

Beautiful words, but they weren’t addressed to Dortchen. He was writing to his brother, Jacob, who’d recently left for Paris. It was one of many examples of the deep connection that tied the brothers throughout their lives. Although more emotionally restrained, Jacob was equally bound to Wilhelm: ‘Never, my dear Wilhelm, will we part,’ he once declared, ‘and if one of us were called to another place, the other must at once give warning. We have become so used to this companionship, that separation could grieve me to death.’

Playing second fiddle to his brother was only one of the drawbacks that Dortchen would have to endure as Wilhelm’s wife. There were also the lack of a fixed income, the antiquarian preoccupations, the terrible health. Along with short breath, Wilhelm conceded in his autobiography, ‘and the constant fierce pains in my chest, there was now a heart condition. The pain, which I could only compare to the sensation of a flaming arrow being shot through my heart from time to time, left me with a constant feeling of anxiety.’ The wonder isn’t that Dortchen took so long to become his wife, but rather, that she agreed to marry him at all.

By 1850, when Wilhelm and Dortchen had been husband and wife for two and a half decades, the brothers were so well known they became the subject of a popular one-act spoof called *Someone Has to Marry*. ‘Oh, to know such fools as you are!’ declares their aunt, in Alexander Victor Zechmeister’s play script: ‘Other people, who aren’t buried the whole day long in books, know what is right.’ So she sets them an ultimatum: one of them must find a wife. The brothers draw lots, and Jacob is forced to go courting, but he proves so inept that Wilhelm takes the plunge instead, sacrificing himself on the altar of domestic stability.

The inference isn’t exactly subtle: the brothers were married to their books, and Wilhelm only resorted to marriage because they needed a woman to ‘keep house’ after the departure of their sister Lotte (who had married Louis Hassenpflug, a member of that other key storytelling family, a few years earlier). Zechmeister was spinning comedy gold out of a popular perception of the Grimms, when their fame was at its peak. From Dortchen’s perspective, it isn’t very kind, but that doesn’t mean it can be dismissed.[FN2]

Amongst the artwork on display at Grimm World, in Kassel, is a charcoal sketch by Ludwig Grimm that shows the Grimm household in the 1820s. A party is sitting for a game of Poch, a form of poker. Lotte is curled up in an armchair while a cat tries to upend a milk jug and a maid is working a spinning-wheel. At the table sit Wilhelm, Jacob, a couple of their friends and one woman: Dortchen, her name scribbled underneath. Ludwig's sketch isn't flattering: under her bonnet, her nose sticks out like a beak and her face is inky with pockmarks. But she's holding a set of cards, taking part in the game. She was at home, Ludwig's sketch suggests, in the Grimms' masculine household, sharing in the brothers' pastimes. Wilhelm certainly recognised how perfectly she suited him, writing late in life that 'I have never ceased to be grateful to God for the happiness and the blessings of marriage.'

What Zechmeister's play, along with nearly every account of their marriage, omitted to consider was what it meant for Dortchen. Bookish and unhealthy Wilhelm Grimm might have been, but he was also handsome, kindly and charming: 'Gifted with a rare grace of spirit and of form', in the words of an acquaintance; with the 'capacity of imparting to all who approached him his own tranquillity', according to his son. As for Jacob, he was 'a worker bee', as Dortchen put it, less sociable but devoted to his niece and nephews, and deeply attached to his sister-in-law. He always recorded Dortchen's birthday and name-day in his journal, and in an unusually emotional letter he once wrote that 'I have so much love for you, as my sister'. A few years after her marriage to Wilhelm, Jacob made discrete mention in a letter about a crisis involving his opium addict brother Ferdinand. 'Everybody wonders about our household,' he wrote, 'and had God not allotted Dortchen so cheerful a mind, it would have been even harder.' Dortchen and Wilhelm named their first-born child after Jacob. When their child died in infancy, Jacob bought his sister-in-law a special ring with a carnelian head as a consolation gift. The correspondences of the brothers, as well as of Dortchen, show unwavering mutual goodwill, which endured till the ends of their lives.

The Tale of a Brother and Sister

A woodcutter and his wife are so stricken by poverty they can't even feed their own children. In despair, the wife tells her husband they'll have to take their children into the forest and abandon them, or 'we must all die of hunger together'. But their children, who are called Hansel and Gretel, have overheard their discussion. Hansel collects some shiny pebbles and drops them along the way, so they're able to find their way home. However, the next time there is no warning, and all Hansel can strew are some breadcrumbs, which are gobbled up by the birds.

After three days wandering in the forest, the siblings find a little house made out of bread and cakes. At last – something to eat! Hansel grabs a piece of the roof while Gretel nibbles a sugary windowpane. But an old woman appears in the doorway and invites them inside, treating them to pancakes, milk and apples, and giving them soft beds to sleep in.

She might be acting like a fairy godmother, but she's really a witch, and she's planning to eat them. She locks Hansel in a pig-pen and makes Gretel cook the food to fatten him up, feeding the girl on nothing but crawfish shells. But witches have terrible eyesight, and whenever she visits the pig-pen to see if Hansel is fat enough to cook, he pokes a bone through the grate. He's still too thin, she decides, leaving him to live another day. Her patience is running out, however, and eventually she declares, 'whether it be fat enough now or not, tomorrow I will butcher and boil it'. She tells Gretel to prepare the oven, which is already lit. But Gretel acts dumb. Can you show me how to get inside, she asks. So the witch thrusts her head through the door, and Gretel seizes her chance: she pushes her into the oven and fastens the bolt, burning the witch to death.

Now Hansel and Gretel are free. They gather some jewels from the witch's hidden chests and carry them home. Their mother has died and their father has been inconsolable since he abandoned his children. They empty out the jewels on the cottage floor, as delighted to be back home as their father is to see them again, and the three of them live happily ever after.

Chapter 12

A Wealth of Blessings

The popularity of the 1825 ‘Small Edition’ spearheaded the cult of the Grimms. Their dogged work on German folk tales, along with their other intellectual endeavours, had already established their reputation in local scholarly circles. But with the growing commercial success of the *Children’s and Household Tales*, and its rapidly spreading international reach, they were turning into the most iconic figures in folklore, a reputation reflected by Zechmeister’s theatrical spoof in 1850. Fascinated by folklore from all around the world (hence their early interest in Giambattista Basile’s *Tale of Tales*), they corresponded with luminaries across Europe, such as Sir Walter Scott, the Norwegian collectors Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Engebretsen Moe, and the Serbian philologist Vuk Karadžić (who curated the popular Balkan epic known as *The Kosovo Cycle*). The British author John T. Kemble dedicated his translation of *Beowulf* to Jacob; honours were heaped on them from academies in Sweden, Russia, Hungary and as far away as America; and they were visited by other famous fairy tellers such as Hans Christian Andersen (although the sensitive Dane was a little put out when he knocked on their door in Berlin and Jacob rather tactlessly declared that he’d never heard of him). Their pioneering methods – which included comparative, interdisciplinary notes and indication of sources – inspired story collectors around the world, such as the Russian folklorist Aleksandr Afanas’ev, Joseph Jacobs in Britain and W. B. Yeats in Ireland, and formed the basis of what is known today as comparative literature.

The brothers’ fame made them too big for a provincial backwater like Kassel. When the role of chief librarian fell vacant and Jacob was snubbed, he turned elsewhere, accepting a professorship in the university town of Göttingen. Jacob, Wilhelm and Dortchen were a team, and they set up home together. Wilhelm was appointed lecturer (and later professor) in

medieval literature, and together with their academic duties, the brothers became increasingly active politically. In 1837 they signed a document protesting against the annulment of the constitution by the Elector of Hanover. Broadcast by students, the document of the ‘Göttingen Seven’ became a keystone in the development of German liberalism, winning the Grimms even more admirers. However, its immediate effect was expulsion from the university and the Kingdom of Hanover.

Accepting an invitation from the King of Prussia, the Grimms made their way to Berlin in 1840. From a sedentary life in Kassel, they had become inveterate roamers, not only mingling with cultural figures but also making speeches at political conferences. Professorships were bestowed, they were appointed to the Academy of Sciences, and Jacob was elected to the first German parliament in 1848. They continued to work together, and devoted those later years to their German dictionary, a laborious project on which they toiled with characteristic diligence (Wilhelm had only reached the letter *D* by the time of his death in 1859, and Jacob was on the word *frucht* (‘fruit’) at the time of his passing in 1863; the dictionary wouldn’t be completed, by their many successors, before 1961).

Although Berlin had become their centre of operations, they never forgot Kassel: among the pictures in their apartment, there were sketches by Ludwig of the Grimms’ home on Marktgasse, and another of the Golden Sun apothecary, where Dortchen had lived for so much of her life.

Dortchen never complained about the brothers’ closeness. In a letter to her friend Bettina von Arnim, she wrote of her relationship with Jacob: ‘we are always the earliest up and drink coffee together and we often confess that it is our best time of the day’. Her letters are full of the practical details of nineteenth-century household management: worrying about the heating, Wilhelm’s insomnia, the cramps and pains suffered by her daughter Auguste. If there was a gripe, it was over the brothers’ workaholism, but this was always entwined with her concern for their health: ‘the poor men work from morning till late in the night,’ she wrote in 1852. ‘Think now there are about four times 150,000 [items] collected in the dictionary and there is always more coming.’ Her correspondence suggests she was familiar with many details of their work. In one illuminating letter she mentioned that she’d been talking to the brothers’

old contact Professor von Savigny about the low income Jacob was receiving for his writings.

Wilhelm had always suffered poor health, so it was no surprise that he died before Jacob, in 1859 – the surprise was that he lasted to the age of seventy-three. Jacob lived four years longer, cared for in his final illness by Dortchen and her daughter Auguste; and Dortchen herself survived until 1867, when a chronic lung complaint led to pneumonia.

'Yesterday at one o'clock in the afternoon, after seven days of pelvic inflammation, our dear Mama fell asleep,' wrote her son Hermann on 23 August. Although the pain was 'severe', Hermann insisted, 'Her end was a comforting one.' Only a few days earlier, she had written to her younger son Rudolf, telling him 'that she hadn't felt so happy for a long time', and Hermann was consoled by the smile she gave him shortly before she died. To read his letter is to see how deeply she was loved. 'What will we do, none of us knows,' he wrote, 'and we are all too numbed by the blow, that we have had to foresee every day for so many years.'

A Workshopped Tale

Of all the stories attributed to Dortchen, none remains as enigmatic as 'Hansel and Gretel'. While most of the *Children's and Household Tales* can be linked to earlier sources,[FN1] this one is harder to track, like stalking a wolverine in the woods after a lifetime hunting deer.

It's true that parts of the story are echoed in earlier tales. The heroine pushing an ogre into an oven occurs in Marie-Catherine d'Aulnoy's 'Finette Cendron'; the abandonment of children by their parents drives the plot of Charles Perrault's 'Thumbling' and Giambattista Basile's 'Nennillo and Nennella'.[FN2] But for all their plausible influence, these earlier tales are individual threads entangled in a wider patchwork. The question is this: who sewed them together to make 'Hansel and Gretel', in the process adding in several new elements, such as the 'house of bread and cakes'?

According to Grimm expert Jack Zipes, 'Hansel and Gretel' was 'an oral tale told by Dortchen Wild'. The German Grimm authority Heinz Rölleke insisted that 'Hansel and Gretel' was narrated by a member of the Wild family – mainly by the fact that Wilhelm rather than Jacob wrote it

down; the rhyming welcome delivered by the witch has been identified with Dortchen. And novelist Kate Forsyth has suggested the story was shaped by Dortchen's experience of paternal abuse, drawing a fictional analogy between the child who wasn't allowed to leave her parents and the children whose parents wouldn't let them stay.

There are other theories, however. The scholar Willem de Blécourt has argued 'the influence of Marie Hassenpflug can be suspected here, for she was the one to spice her stories with fragments from the work of the Frenchwoman' (mentioning the echo from d'Aulnoy's 'Finette Cendron'), although he concedes that 'The house of bread may have originated with Dortchen'. Her likely authorship is enhanced by the tale's inclusion in the manuscript sent to Clemens Brentano in October 1810, which predates the Grimms' transcriptions of tales from the Hassenpflugs. But 'Hansel and Gretel' went through several versions, so it's conceivable that more than one teller was involved in its creation.

'Far from labouring with a "dying oral tradition",' writes de Blécourt, 'Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm noted down fledgling stories that were assembled because they had asked for it . . . Through the gender dynamics in their meetings with the brothers Grimm, the young women exercised their own agency, by giving their own twist to stories already in print.'

By asking for stories, the Grimms were overseeing the invention of new stories, influenced by the young women's reading and memories of childhood tales, but flying off on the wings of their own unbridled imaginations. The house on Marktgasse wasn't just a laboratory for the collection of traditional tales; it was a workshop where new tales were created.

The communal involvement in 'Hansel and Gretel' was reinforced for me by a visit to the Black Forest a few days after wandering around Hesse. Tramping between dark pines and maples, mushrooms clinging to their leathery bark, and clambering over rocks virescent with lichen and bryophytes, I hauled myself into a wooden hikers' hut – a less edible shelter than Hansel and Gretel's and also a colder one. So I was glad to see a fire burning when I made it back to the village of Waldkirch the following day. Not that there was much chance of warming my hands around it: the fire was being circled by a coven of witches.

Beaklike noses curled towards the jutting claws of their chins, protruding from faces of deeply wrinkled wood. Their red and white

spotted skirts were matched by their bonnets and they all wore red gloves. In the darkness, they swept their brooms around the village square, eyes glowing behind their masks. They paraded around the fire, swishing their brooms on either side like skiers adjusting their poles, arms spidering the air in ritualised gestures suggesting an ancient Bacchic feast. At the end of their dance, they twisted their fingers inside their gloves and raised their broomsticks, which appeared to conjure a hissing explosion of fireworks, to a great cheer from the crowd around them. Red and golden light sprayed the sky over a chorus of howling, a triumph of witches dispelled at last by the tolling of a church bell.

They might have appeared to be witches – but once the masks came off they were revealed as men. Lantern-jawed and broad-shouldered, they were members of Waldkirch's all-male Guild of Witches, which has been putting on an annual witch dance since 1975, as part of the pre-Lenten festivities known as *Fassnacht*.

'It's a tradition for the Witches' Sabbath,' explained a guy in his thirties called Oliver, who was holding his mask in his hand. 'Everybody comes to the square and we do a story. Like a *Märchen* – a fairy tale.'

Their look, said another witch, called Christoph, was 'from the Brothers Grimm – from the illustrations in the old *Märchen*.'

Here's a surreal irony: men dressing up as witches, in a region where the male-dominated culture used to light its execution pyres at the merest whiff of female occultism. In nearby Freiburg, scholars were especially active in denouncing witchcraft. 'If the witches are not burned,' wrote George Pietorius, a sixteenth-century classicist at Freiburg University, 'the number of these furies swells up in such an immense sea that no one could live safe from their spells and charms.' In south-west Germany the witch-hunts were especially virulent, drawing from the imperial law code of 1532, which recommended that witches be executed 'with fire', and statutes relating to them weren't abolished until 1813 – when Dortchen had already narrated most of her tales to the Grimms. The date is significant, showing how long the perceived menace of female sorcery endured, but also how that perception evolved. Like the Middle Eastern characters popularised in Europe a century earlier, or the pirates who would become stock characters for children's tales during the course of the nineteenth century, witches were no longer perceived as an existential threat to the social fabric. Parents could frighten their children with tales

about them because they were no longer frightened by the witches themselves.

Court records of southern Germany in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are crammed with the testimonials of ‘witches’, like a gravedigger’s wife from Nordlingen who confessed to being seduced by the devil and attending a banquet where the food was the body of a dead child, and a woman accused in a Stuttgart tavern of giving a ‘poisoned apple’ to a senior bailiff’s wife. It’s curious how often these details anticipate the Grimms’ fairy tales – Snow-White’s apple, the witch’s cannibalism in ‘Hansel and Gretel’. In the classic novel of the period, the tongue-twistingly titled *Adventures of Simplicius Simplicissimus* (1669), the climax of ‘Hansel and Gretel’ is eerily foreshadowed in one of the raids that chewed up central Europe in the Thirty Years War. A group of rogue soldiers tortures a family of peasants, ‘as if they were extracting confessions from witches before burning them; they put one of the peasants into the oven and lit a fire under him even before he had confessed to any crime’.

The burning of innocents: here’s a reminder of the historical injustices for which fairy tales provide a false cover that time has warped into cosy bedtime tales. As Lyndal Roper has written, in her seminal study *Witch Craze* (2004): ‘Gretel thinks she will be eaten by the witch, but in fact the child is the one who kills the old lady. The fairy tale mirrors the realities of witchcraft accusations, in which those who feared the witch’s power actually brought about her death.’

The witch is the outsider and her killers are mainstream society. But fairy telling has glamourised magic, nibbling away at the rotting remains of the moral structures that used to surround it. The same social conformity that led men to light the faggots under the witches’ feet now inspires them to wrap their heads in spotted bonnets and dance with broomsticks around their village square.

Watch the witches dance today and you’re watching a community celebrating its shared stories, which reflects the communal roots of Dortchen’s stories. This was what the Grimms were looking for when they began their search, and it’s why they trusted the tales that young women like Dortchen Wild and Marie Hassenpflug narrated to them.

But many of the stories passed down through the community carry the marks of the individuals who did the passing. In Dortchen’s case, we see

her signature in the surreal images that glitter in her tales. Once, attending a ball at the court of King Jérôme, she recalled ‘the most splendid artificial things of glistening sugar which the French sugar-bakers had made’, with a little girl in a white silk dress sitting on a ‘bonbonnière’. Although this ball probably took place after she had narrated ‘Hansel and Gretel’, it reflects the luxurious excess associated with sugary items in those frugal days, and their connection with the less palatable aspects of life. Communal storytellers could have spun and shared out stories about witches living in the woods, but it was Dortchen’s eye for the surreal that gave ‘Hansel and Gretel’ its most iconic image: the ‘house of bread and cakes’. It is one of several signature notes in this tale, along with Gretel’s industry, the rhymes Dortchen inserted into the story, the fear of being cast out of the family; features that overlap with other tellers but resonate particularly in Dortchen’s tales.

This doesn’t mean we should insist on her exclusive authorship of ‘Hansel and Gretel’. Marie Hassenpflug, that talented teller of tales, was fascinated by dens in the woods, and most of her tales involved journeys among the trees (from Snow-White’s refuge with the seven dwarves to the robber’s bride hiding in his blood-soaked fastness). It’s part of the power of ‘Hansel and Gretel’ that it refuses to let us pin it down. The breadcrumbs keep on disappearing and every investigator ends up lost in the woods.

Searching for the roots of fairy tales is a process of entangling oneself in mysteries. Delve into the sources and we can find, every so often, the frayed end of the line, but there are always more knots to untie. Dortchen passed stories on to the Grimms, but she wasn’t their instigator. She was a conduit in a process with so many participants it would be impossible to identify all the links in the chain. The stories were shared, performed, retold and re-edited (particularly the latter – Wilhelm Grimm’s poeticising work in that respect shouldn’t be overlooked): in modern terms, they were workshopped. It’s because they passed through these phases of transmission that they were able to strike such a successful balance between local texture and universal appeal. They evoke the world that made them, but unlike the more idiosyncratic, site-specific tales of Giambattista Basile, they aren’t confined by it.

The success of the *Children’s and Household Tales* rippled across Europe’s national borders, providing a model for the legion of folklorists

tramping around the continent. In the wake of the Grimms' growing celebrity, you could have zigzagged all over Europe on the trails of its folklorists: from the British Isles with the Gaelic tales and songs recorded by the diminutive Anglo-Irish clerk Thomas Crofton Croker (whose book was translated by the Grimms in 1826, just a year after its English publication) and across the tip of Scandinavia with the stories gathered in the 1830s by Asbjørnsen and Moe, most famously 'East of the Sun and West of the Moon'; down through eastern Europe with books like Karel Jaromír Erben's 1853 *Bouquet*, part of the Czech's collection of more than two thousand Slavic tales; back across Germany with the Bavarian tales collected by Franz Schönwerth in the 1850s and 1860s and the Flemish tales published in 1843 by Johann Wilhelm Wolf (who, like Erben and Schönwerth, was inspired by the brothers' methods); down to the Mediterranean for the Greek folk tales assembled in the 1870s by the German philologist Bernhard Schmidt and the mesmerising Sicilian tales collected by the Swiss consul's daughter Laura Gonzenbach (many of which echoed those in Giambattista Basile's *Tale of Tales*), published in 1870.

Like the contemporary gold prospectors rushing across California, folklorists were digging around for storytelling lucre wherever they could find it. In the closing decades of the century the pool continued to widen, with notable collections emerging in the Americas (such as the 'Brer Rabbit' stories and other tales of trickster heroes resisting the authorities, narrated by black slaves like George Terrell and adapted by the Atlanta journalist Joel Chandler Harris from the 1880s onwards – so successfully that he was invited to the White House by Teddy Roosevelt) and Asia (for example in Japan, where a Greek-Irish adventurer called Lafcadio Hearn married into a family in Matsue and published a collection of fairy tales about magic mirrors, goblin-spiders, many-headed serpents and dancing samurai). By the dawn of the twentieth century story collecting had become a global enterprise – and this was in no small measure thanks to the reach of the *Children's and Household Tales.*

Some of the most striking of these collections emerged in Russia. Which is where our trail now turns, riding across the marshes and birch forests, alighting in the Siberian tundra. The German tales are often celebrated for their darkness; but compared with the *skazki* of Russia, they are lullabies sung over the milky-smelling cots of newborns.

Because now it’s time to go dark. This is where fairy telling turns out the lights and bares its fangs. It’s time to follow the most contradictory and probably the strangest of all our fairy tellers, a man who took the thorny, rubble-strewn road to hell.

PART FIVE

The Rise and Fall of Ivan the Fool

‘Fie, fie, fie! I can smell a Russian soul. What are you up to, girl, doing a deed or fleeing a deed?’

Baba Yaga, ‘The Stepdaughter and the Stepmother’s Daughter’ (*Great Russian Fairy Tales*, 1860)

The Tale of a Fool and His Horse

Three brothers set out to look for wives, and after a long and fruitless search, they end up in the house of a Baba Yaga, a witch with iron teeth and a single bony leg like a bird's. Still, her daughters are pretty, so the brothers decide to marry them.

One problem: the witch is planning to chop up the brothers and eat them. Fortunately, the youngest brother, who is known as Ivan the Fool, is warned about this by a magical talking horse (given to him by a supernatural stallion, which he caught in a noose when it was eating his father's millet). So he advises his brothers to swap places in their beds with their wives. That way, the wives are executed by the Baba Yaga's walking axe, and the brothers escape with their lives. They take a magic carpet hidden behind a pile of wood chips and ride to freedom, and never give their dead wives another thought.

While his brothers head off in one direction, Ivan goes in another. Arriving in a city to the sound of gunshot, he discovers the tsar has executed a man who volunteered to win him the hand of the beautiful Princess Elena – and failed. So Ivan, being a fool, offers his services.

Discovering the beautiful princess in a faraway kingdom, he attracts her attention by training a cat to dance under her window. The princess is impressed, and when he makes her a beautiful garden full of songbirds, she sits down on a carpet, which happens to be the magic carpet he stole from Baba Yaga's hut. Off the carpet swoops and flies them to the tsar.

But not so fast . . . If the princess is to marry the tsar, she insists, a few terms will have to be met. So Ivan is dispatched on various errands, advised by his ever-useful talking horse. He hoodwinks Elena's nurse, luring her with bundles of calico onto a merchant's ship so he can bring her to court; then braves the stamping hooves of Elena's fearsome horse, throwing a dozen skins over its back and fastening them with pins. At last, the princess has everything she wants, and the marriage goes ahead, a splendid affair at which Ivan the Fool – youngest son of a millet farmer – sits in honour at the side of the tsar.

Chapter 13

Ivan Khudiakov

It’s a cliché of nineteenth-century Russia: the young idealistic intellectual, trampled by the cruelty of the tsarist system, spat out to Siberia to die a gibbering wreck in a mental ward. But Ivan Khudiakov was more than that. He was a teenage prodigy who published, in 1860, his first and most significant collection, *Great Russian Fairy Tales*, at the age of just eighteen. As an example of the collision between fairy telling and tawdry political reality, Ivan is one of the most fascinating fairy tellers who ever lived. He was far from the only collector to gather tales from oral sources in the wake of the Grimms, but none lived as tempestuous a life. And none would connect their fairy telling as actively to the siren call of revolution.

Amongst the tales he amassed were several about the fearsome witch Baba Yaga, with her hut on chicken legs and her fence of glowing skulls, the beautiful Princess Elena and the doughty hero Prince Ivan, who rides along a terror-haunted road to capture the magnificent Firebird and is revived by the Waters of Life after being chopped into pieces by the sorcerer Khoshchey the Deathless. Russian fairy tales are a world of their own: strange and macabre and laced with a quintessentially Russian vitality. But that doesn’t stop them from stretching out to embrace the wider fairy telling world. We hear echoes of our earlier fairy tellers in many of Ivan’s tales – a Cinderella heroine called Zamarashka, for example, whose sisters mutilate their feet to try and fit the shoe; a version of ‘Beauty and the Beast’ called ‘Phoenix-Feather-Falcon’; Dortchen Wild’s Mother Hölle recast as Baba Yaga, punishing the ungracious daughter and rewarding the virtuous in ‘The Stepdaughter and the Stepmother’s Daughter’, among many other connections.

Ivan left behind a vivid memoir, smuggled abroad and published in 1876, the year of his death, in which he linked his life with the dramatic events in the tales. But as he pointed out, with characteristic candour, ‘I

was not a hero.' An acquaintance described him as 'a man of small height, skinny, sickly, extremely nervous, with a thin voice and small nervous eyes'.

'Ivan the Fool', we might call him, which happens to be the name of the hero in several tales that he brought to light. The difference being that Ivan the Fool ends up sitting beside the tsar heaped with riches. For Ivan Khudiakov, on the other hand, riches would prove as elusive as getting on with the tsarist authorities.

From Burial Mound to Cooking Pot

Ever since he was kicked in the nuts by a resentful horse, Ivan Khudiakov believed he was different. To be fair to the horse, he'd been pulling its tail and trying to mimic the sound of its bells. To be fair to Ivan, he was five. The result, according to Ivan's interpretation, was that his voice never dropped from a choirboy's alto and he was unable to grow much facial hair (which, for a nineteenth-century Russian with literary aspirations, was a serious handicap). As far as the young Siberian was concerned, the angry horse had given him the characteristics of a eunuch.

Born in 1842 in the city of Kurgan, a frontier post named after a nearby burial mound, he grew up in Asiatic Russia, just a few miles from Kazakhstan. His father was a local school inspector who married one of his students. In Ivan's infancy, his mother believed she saw 'a glowing halo above my head, a sign that the grace of God lived in me'. The poor woman had little idea just how unusual her son would prove to be, nor that she would spend the last months of her life trying to visit him in a hospital mental ward.

From an early age, Ivan recognised himself to be an outsider. At school in the Siberian town of Tobolsk, he was 'always the first in my class' and his name 'figured constantly on the roll of honour'. Classmates leaned on him to do their schoolwork, he compiled an algebra manual and corrected the French texts of lower classes, 'owing to the laziness of the French teacher'. Useful he may have been, but he didn't think much of his peers, who as far as he was concerned spent too much time masturbating, 'at a time when blood is much needed for growing and strength'. As for the teachers – they were the worst possible role models. There was the French

teacher who often turned up to class ‘completely drunk’ and had the students dancing to ‘Going down the Volga’; the priest who taught religion, who ‘distinguished himself above all by his rudeness’; and the red-nosed German teacher who boasted about his many affairs with German princesses and the subsequent duels. Small-town Siberia was never a likely candidate for an educational utopia. Still, Ivan was glad to exchange the inadequacies of Tobolsk for university life in Kazan.

A great medieval city, Kazan had been the capital of the Mongol-Tartar Golden Horde before it was captured in the sixteenth century by Ivan the Terrible. Wrapped inside the white sandstone walls of its fortress, with narrow blue-tipped spires and the blue and gold domes of the Cathedral of the Annunciation, the city was named after the Tartar word for a cooking pot. Which was apt: Kazan was a multiethnic stew, where dark-haired Tartars and Kazakhs in striped kaftans rubbed shoulders with blonde Slavs and tribesmen from the further reaches of Siberia, juiced in each other’s sweat under the hot sunlight of the steppes.

It was also a student town, rife with drinking and gambling. Ivan looked on those activities with the disapproval of somebody several times his age, but he rebelled in his own way: by taking on the role of librarian for the students’ illegal library, which gave him access to forbidden works by socialist thinkers like Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevsky. He embraced atheism, spurned the Russian Orthodox Church, began to question the monarchy and favoured the establishment of a constitution. A natural contrarian, he was also a curious soul, interested in ‘myths and popular tales’, writing:

> After having read a great number, I noted a family air, a sort of common structure. ‘From where were they taken?’ This was the question that, like a nail, hammered itself into my head. I threw myself avidly on all the sources that I could find at Kazan, but consulting them in vain, one after the other, I couldn’t find the answer.

A few years after the Grimms had developed their comparative literary approach in western Europe, the teenage Ivan was wrestling with similar issues, and this would lead him to collecting the stories that formed his *Great Russian Fairy Tales*. But Kazan was not the place, he decided, to find the answers to these questions, ‘and at last I resolved to go and seek out this science in Moscow’.

Skazki, or fairy tales, had been popular for many centuries. Ivan the Terrible, back in the sixteenth century, had three storytellers who lulled him to sleep with tales, and in the eighteenth century the mighty Catherine the Great was depicted in popular prints as the witch Baba Yaga. Common as these stories were, it was only in Ivan's lifetime that they were collected and systematised. As he recognised, 'folk literature was in fashion'.

He wouldn't be the first Russian scholar to take on the nation's rich trove of *skazki*. These folk tales had been preserved by the *skomorokhi*, wandering storytellers who entertained the crowds at village feasts, sawing their fiddles and chanting mantras to summon the spirits of the other world. With the rise of the Romantic movement in Russia, *skazki* had found their way into print. An early interpreter was the beloved poet Aleksandr Pushkin, who adapted tales he'd heard from his childhood nurse, such as the beguiling *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (published in 1820). 'A hut stands there on chicken legs,' he wrote, 'Without windows, without doors, / Where Baba Yaga rides a mortar / That moves by its own power . . . There you'll find the Russian scent . . . there it smells of Rus'.

With their swampy birch forests, steaming bathhouses and log houses, the tales were spun out of a world that was recognisably Russian. So it became a matter of national importance to collect and codify these tales. If the Germans could manage it, still a few years away from national unification, then surely so could imperial Russia. The Royal Geographical Society presided over the collection of hundreds of tales, many of them provided by literary stars such as Vladimir Dahl, a close associate of Pushkin's who compiled the *Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language*.

But it was down to a minor clerk called Aleksandr Afanas'ev to produce the definitive collection of Russian fairy tales. A bibliophile with a meagre salary as an archivist at the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, he scoured the public records for material and assembled eight 'fascicles' of *Russian Fairy Tales*, published from 1855 to 1863. Afanas'ev didn't collect the tales himself, but he was artful in his interpretations of them. Most were gathered by local authorities, from clerks, clergymen and other petty functionaries across the provinces. A sizeable number came from

individual collectors like Vladimir Dahl (the latter personally sent Afanas'ev his collection of 228 tales, declaring: 'I haven't the time to publish them myself as I have so much work . . . you may do what you like with it').

Afanas'ev had a sumptuous trove at his disposal, and the talent to make it shine. Amongst the pearls of his *Russian Fairy Tales* is 'Baba Yaga and Vasilisa the Fair', which echoes 'Cinderella' and 'Hansel and Gretel', with its put-upon heroine sent by her stepsisters to fetch fire from a witch in the forest. Finding a hut standing on chicken legs, Vasilisa follows the bony-legged Baba Yaga inside, and submits to a series of chores. If she fails, the witch will eat her; but if she succeeds, she can ask for anything she wishes. Helped by a magical doll, she passes the witch's test and is rewarded with a skull glowing with fire. She carries it back home, inadvertently incinerating her stepsisters and stepmother and releasing herself from their cruelty. So Baba Yaga, the witch who wanted to eat her, becomes Vasilisa's unlikely protector.

Over the decades these darkly imaginative tales would grow in stature, inspiring ballets by Stravinsky and artwork by painters like Ivan Bilibin. But Afanas'ev was working at the beginning of their codification, and like his younger contemporary, Ivan Khudiakov, he would enjoy minimal credit in his lifetime. His collection *Russian National Legends* (1860) was denounced by the Holy Synod and suppressed within a year of its publication, and he fell under suspicion after meeting émigrés dissidents like Herzen on a trip to western Europe in 1860. On his return, his house in Moscow was searched. Nothing incriminating was found, but the chairman of the investigating committee, Prince Golitsyn, recommended action be taken, given the risk that 'the accused civil servant,' he wrote, 'may collaborate with people of evil intent'.

It was a fatal decision. Afanas'ev lost his job and his house, and in order to survive he was forced to sell his library. 'Books once nourished me with ideas,' he drily remarked, 'now – with bread.' Reduced to humble employment, he worked as a court clerk and lived in a damp room so draughty he had to cover the walls in pages from a literary magazine he'd unsuccessfully tried to launch. When spots of blood showed on the handkerchiefs he pressed to his mouth, he laughed off his consumption as a 'mild lung disorder', but he knew it was serious enough to require a visit to a sanatorium. It was too late. The sting of his deprivation had already

worked its poison, and within a year he was on his way to Moscow's Pyatnitskoye Cemetery, aged forty-five.

That same year, 1871, the great novelist Ivan Turgenev wrote to a friend, 'not long ago A. N. Afanas'ev died literally of hunger, and his literary achievements will be known long after yours and mine, my amiable friend, have been devoured by the darkness of oblivion.' Although the novelist was being modest, it's true that Afanas'ev's legacy has flared brightly. Anybody familiar with Russian fairy tales – with Baba Yaga, the Firebird, Elena the Beautiful or Khoshchey the Deathless, whose mortality is concealed in an egg inside a duck eaten by a hare locked in a treasure chest buried under an oak tree – should give the ill-fated archivist their applause. His collection ranks not only as one of the largest but also one of the richest in the fairy-telling world.

By the time Afanas'ev was coughing up his lungs, Ivan Khudiakov had already fallen into a pit of trouble as terrible as the one into which the hero is thrown in 'The Firebird', the first of his published tales: crawling with reptiles and very hard to climb your way out of. But for a short period these two distinctive talents aligned: two humbly born collectors, presenting Russia's storytelling spoils to the bookshops sprouting all over Moscow and St Petersburg, the so-called 'two capitals'. Ivan's *Great Russian Fairy Tales* was published in 1860, when Afanas'ev only had a couple of 'fascicles' of his collection to go. But if 1860 was summertime for Russian fairy telling, it was also the moment when the weather started to turn. By the end of that year, Afanas'ev had lost his job and house, and Ivan was on his way to trouble with the authorities of Moscow University. By the middle of the decade winter had descended on both of them.

Uproar at Uni

Before he left Kazan in 1859, Ivan had already collected a few tales, including 'Ivan the Fool' and a version of 'Cinderella' entitled 'Zamarashka' (which translates as 'Dirty Girl'). However, it was in the villages near Moscow, especially in Ryazan province, that he found his richest trove of tales.

Grassy marshes and reed swamps suckle the waters of the Don, nourishing forests where oak and spruce and especially birch prick the sky,

silver trunks piled tight as needles in a giant's sewing box. Pulling myself off my lumpy mattress, I peered out at this view, on the train to Moscow – the greenness garish after several months in Central Asia. Those swampy forests have stuck in my mind ever since, and I see them whenever I turn the pages of the *skazki*. But for all the region's lush atmosphere, it was hardly an auspicious location for a culture hunt. 'It is difficult,' wrote Ivan, 'to figure people more laborious and poor than the peasants who I saw near the capital. They didn't have a single fork in their *izbas*[FN1] and replaced this utensil with splinters of wood.'

He was visiting the villages, and producing his fairy tale collections, during the period of the Emancipation of the Serfs. The edict liberating a third of Russia's population (23 million people) from the ownership of the gentry was passed in March 1861. It was a seismic change the ripples of which would be felt well into the twentieth century. Shackled with debts and resentful of the changes, many landowners refused to upgrade their machinery and stifled their labourers with redemption payments, imposing high rents and fines for livestock trespasses. With population growth increasing pressure on the land, the Emancipation raised a raft of other issues, as Ivan witnessed on his journeys among the villages.

'Can it be that the great emperor leaves us without wood and without drink?' he recorded some of the freed serfs saying. 'It is useless,' he wrote, 'to point out that, in such circumstances, people became hostile to the government and avidly lent ear to all the political talk.' When he visited some of these villages, a couple of years after his first collection was published, he was greeted as a 'magician' by people still labouring under mass illiteracy, for whom a published author was a remarkable figure. 'Converted by force to Christianity,' he noted, 'they continued their divine prayers to the forests and left various offerings in the woods.' When village girls on mushroom-picking ventures took away the offerings left on the trees, he noted, 'The natives saw the disappearance of these things as proof that the divinity was well disposed to them.'

These forest divinities are present in the fairy tales he collected, as sorcerers and witches who menace the heroes but offer rewards if they carry out their tasks and treat the natural world respectfully (listening to birch trees, not taking honey when the bees promise help, giving a lump of butter to Baba Yaga's cat). Royalty may feature in some of the tales, but most are about the lives of villagers. Ivan's heroes are millers and

mushroom gatherers, millet farmers and weavers of bast shoes, a peasant's daughter who dresses as a soldier to do her father's military service on his behalf, a ploughman who battles seventy-seven knights – and kills them all with his scythe.

Even the prince-heroes have the attitudes of villagers (for example, in 'The Firebird', Prince Ivan's lazy and treacherous brothers are punished by having to look after the cows, and the most common punishment for villains – whether cheating princes, murderous queens or thieving serfs – is to be tied to a horse's tail and dragged across an open field). Ivan's tales are full of the textures of village life, with their emphasis on physical labour – shearing sheep, milking cows, grinding flour, sowing peas, picking berries, stripping birch-bark bast to make sandals. Which is no wonder. Ivan roamed villages such as Zholchin, in the Ryazan province, and Selina, in the province of Tula, listening to the local storytellers. He wasn't just pulling his tales out of dusty archives, he was sitting down with the *skomorokhi*, recording their tales straight from their mouths.

In the course of just a few years, in the late 1850s and early 1860s, he collected more than a hundred and twenty tales. The first edition of his *Great Russian Fairy Tales*, containing forty stories, earned him an advance of 150 roubles. 'It was a truly grand sum,' he recalled, 'for a man living as simply as I was then; nevertheless, I spent it in twenty-four hours: I bought for 130 roubles some German books and the rest of the money went to pay my debts.'

The collection may not have made his fortune, but it was a significant entry into the literary field. It was favourably reviewed in several journals, and it earned him what he described as

> a certain literary notoriety . . . I was no more than eighteen years old; my youth and perhaps also the poverty of my appearance confused a lot of people about my identity; when I presented myself under the name of Khudiakov, many took me for a messenger of the writer and, when I explained that they were mistaken, they looked at me with an air of astonishment.

Eighteen years old and a published collector – not bad for a kid from the sticks. Hold this course, his teachers counselled, and Ivan would be a teacher, later a doctor, an academician by his mid-twenties. But the move to Moscow, for all its advantages, lured the single-minded student into controversial territory. His candour, which makes his memoir so

compelling, was less helpful in the duplicitous atmosphere of the university, which he described as ‘an intellectual police tribunal whose only goal was to form excellent snitches’.

When a group of students wrote a letter complaining about an abusive teacher, only six of them had the nerve to sign it – Ivan being one of them. Instead of sacking the teacher, the authorities expelled the students. ‘Here is the conclusion at which the most resolute of students arrive,’ wrote Ivan, ‘so the administration, by these illegal acts, pushes its subordinates on the revolutionary way.’

At least institutional incompetence was on his side. Readmitted into the university, he retained his student membership, despite missing his end-of-year exams (he’d been distracted by his fairy tale collections), thanks to a clerical error. But luck was running out.

In the turbulent atmosphere of the early 1860s, new ideas were streaking through student society, thanks to the rapid dissemination of new journals and pamphlets. Romanticism and metaphysical philosophy were on the backburner, and the new buzzword was ‘materialism’. When St Petersburg University was closed down in 1861, news was telegraphed to Moscow, where student society grew increasingly rancorous, assembling to protest in the university gardens. At one gathering, in October that year, students marched on their governor general’s residence to challenge the arrest of twenty-five of their comrades. As they made their way down the Tver Boulevard, policemen and soldiers swarmed from every side: ‘the police on horseback seized students on the pavements,’ Ivan recalled, ‘snatched them from the *droshkies*, and sometimes dragged them to the station, pulling them by the hair. Several were crowded underfoot by the police horses, some seriously wounded . . .’

Although Ivan missed out on the action (he was running late that day), his Moscow stint was on its last gasp. Travelling to the countryside to collect more tales and earn some money by giving lessons to the sons of landowners, he left his student card behind with a classmate, who was arrested at another demonstration. Ivan’s card was seized, and although he wasn’t present at the demonstration, the subsequent inquest uncovered the clerical error that had allowed him to continue his studies.

It was still possible to secure a university qualification, following a brief return to Kazan – a secondary ‘candidate’ degree, which allowed him to operate as a private tutor. Kazan, however, was no place for a young,

ambitious intellectual – he saw his future in the ‘two capitals’. One of them had already spat him out, so it was time to try the other one. But it would prove a catastrophic decision.

For it was there, under the misty lights of St Petersburg, that Ivan the Fool would fall in love.

The Tale of Punishment and Reward

A girl is sent by her cruel stepmother to wash yarn in the river, but the yarn floats all the way to the forest. Following the river's course, she finds herself in a glade where a hut stands on a giant pair of chicken legs. 'Fie, I can smell a Russian soul,' declares the witch Baba Yaga, and tells the girl to heat up her bathhouse. But the fuel is human bones, and it won't even smoulder. A sparrow advises the girl to fetch wood from the forest, and when Baba Yaga tells her to collect water in a sieve, the sparrow suggests she smear the sieve with clay. This way, she's able to prepare the bathhouse and fulfil the task.

For her third challenge, Baba Yaga instructs her to wash her children – who turn out to be worms, frogs and rats. Unperturbed, the girl washes them all, and Baba Yaga as well. Afterwards, she heats up a samovar and drinks tea with the witch, who gives her as reward a trunk full of money, and sends her back home.

So jealous is her stepmother that she dispatches her own daughter to Baba Yaga's hut. But this daughter isn't as hard-working. When the sparrow tries to advise her, she swats it away, and when the frogs and rats appear in the bathhouse, she squashes them. So Baba Yaga sends her back home with a trunk. But instead of money, it contains fire, which burns up the stepsister along with her mother.

Chapter 14

The Age of Great Reform

The 1860s was Russian literature's golden decade. Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, with its classic portrait of a 'nihilist' ranting against the aristocracy and conducting experiments on frogs, came out in 1862, the same year that Ivan Khudiakov produced the third and last volume of his *Great Russian Fairy Tales*. The following year saw the publication of Nikolai Chernyshevsky's *What Is to Be Done?*, inspiring a generation of left-leaning intellectuals, and consigning Chernyshevsky to exile in Siberia. In 1864 Leo Tolstoy brought out the first half of his magnum opus, *War and Peace*, and a year later Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* was serialised. When it comes to literary golden ages, this one was twenty-four carat.

Individual geniuses may have hammered out those masterpieces, but they were powered by a collective fuel.[FN1] The period from 1855 to 1866, bookended by the coronation of Tsar Alexander II and the crackdown following the assassination attempt against him, has been labelled the 'Age of Great Reform', and the tsar as 'Alexander the Liberator'. Not only were the serfs emancipated; many of Russia's institutions were overhauled: the *zemstvo* system of local self-government was implemented, the judiciary reorganised and university education expanded. In tandem with this large-scale restructuring was industrialisation, a quantum leap that alarmed as many people as it enthralled. Looking back on the rapid changes in Tolstoy's great novel *Anna Karenina*, the hero Levin reflects 'that of late years those evils had been fostered by a foreign civilization artificially grafted upon Russia, especially as to ways of communication – viz., the railways, which had conduced to a centralization in the cities, a growth of luxury, and consequently to a development of factories at the expense of agriculture . . .'

Levin's characteristically gauche sincerity reflects the concerns across Russian society, where the polarisation of public opinion was articulated through one of the most seismic of all the changes: the growth of the Fourth Estate. This was an information revolution. New periodicals facilitated the spread of ideas and the distribution of serialised masterpieces like *Crime and Punishment*. The same changes were happening all over Europe, pushing the world depicted in fairy tales deeper into the margins, and at the same time making that world ever more attractive to a growing reading public increasingly distant from it. But in Russia the pace of change was too fast for conservative members of the establishment. Increasingly alert to 'radical' talk, they wheeled out their most powerful weapon: censorship.

'Censorship has always been and always will be the cruellest enemy of literature,' wrote Ivan in his memoir. From the first edition of his *Great Russian Fairy Tales*, he experienced the bitterness of official scrutiny. In the preface to that first edition, he recorded enigmatically: 'some circumstances do not allow us to print many interesting fairy tales from our collection'. This was explained more emphatically in his memoir: 'the censors – a horrible thing! – were not satisfied with banning entire tales and mutilating others, they corrected in their own way the popular expressions, and sometimes so clumsily that the account no longer made any sense.' Afanas'ev was another victim of the censors, complaining that he received proofs of his tales 'slashed and crimsoned with red ink'.

Considering that much more provocative material was being produced at the time, it seems odd that the censors devoted so much attention to tales about huts on chicken legs and heroes who could turn themselves into hawks. Were the authorities paranoid, or shrewd in their recognition of the tales' popular reach?[FN2] Throughout the early 1860s relative freedom squeezed through the gaps between renewed bouts of oppression. Over the course of the decade surveillance increased and the incarceration of high-profile figures like Chernyshevsky gave threatening examples to the intellectually free-thinking. Still, as Ivan recorded, 'the new ideas were boldly professed in all the student circles and in a lot of literary societies'. Like the protagonists of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* – a crusty aristocrat and a provocative younger 'nihilist' who end up duelling with pistols – the establishment and the 'Young Russians' were on a collision course.

City of Sex and Soirées

Out of Asia to Russia's most European city. In the autumn of 1862 Ivan peered through the steam from train engines and horses' nostrils, and set foot in St Petersburg. 'I arrived there relatively rich,' he recalled. 'I was the owner of eighty roubles . . . But I spent it immediately on the publication of a third series of tales, so much that I wasn't left with a single kopeck and I even found myself owing money to the printer.'

With its alternating avenues and canals, its stony promontories lapped by the Neva, St Petersburg was a city of pale wintry colours, where sea mist shrouded the streets and only the odd lightly moulded frieze interrupted the monopoly of stone. For long-term resident Dostoyevsky, St Petersburg was 'a fantastic vision of fairyland, like a dream which in its turn could vanish and pass away like vapour in the dark blue sky'. But Ivan's experience was more prosaic. He recalled:

> It is difficult to imagine a more miserable life than that which I led during the second semester of 1862. My lodging consisted of a small corner of a kitchen . . . I passed entire days without eating a thing; in the course of five months, I dined no more than twice, and both times at the homes of acquaintances.

With impressive resilience, he didn't let his poverty stifle his intellectual ambitions. Determined to launch a magazine dedicated to folklore – the first of its kind in Russia – he secured a certificate from the censor's office for his new periodical, 'Fairy Tale World'. But he was about to receive a crushing lesson in 1860s bureaucracy: 'The secretary made a report to the censor's committee; the committee referred it to the minister of public instruction; who advised his colleague of the Interior, who probably consulted the Third Section,[FN3] and at last, by the same sector, arrived a peremptory refusal.' Another project, a 'Collection of Popular Legends', was passed to the ecclesiastical censor because it contained some religious material. After eight days of inspection, permission was formally withheld. The reason given by the archimandrite was: 'It is materialistic.'

With so many stumbling blocks against his literary activities, Ivan desperately needed to find work. So he applied to the public library. The director of the library, Delianov, was familiar with his output. Not that this proved to be any kind of advantage. Seizing Ivan by the arm, Delianov asked: 'But please tell me, are you occupying yourself with political

dreams?’ With his pale complexion, he explained, Ivan looked too much like ‘these political dreamers’ who ‘agitate ceaselessly’.

So much for gaining his fortune under the big city lights; the imperial capital was showing Ivan its coldest profile. Some work for the Geographical Society and a few teaching jobs kept the wolf from the door, but literary activities were expensive, and it was hard to launch your career on an income of just twenty roubles a month. At least Ivan had a few acquaintances who could occasionally feed him and widen his sphere of cultural contacts. These included Vladimir Lebedev, scion of an upper-middle-class family, who had a beautiful sister with aspirations to become a professional singer. Her name was Leonilla, and meeting her would prove a turning point in Ivan’s life.

‘Imagine a young and remarkably beautiful girl, possessing a high forehead, large expressive eyes, regular features, opulent hair, a sonorous voice, a musical ear, an elegant and well-formed figure.’ So Ivan introduces us to the woman who would dramatically affect the direction of his life. Sidling up to him at a soirée, Leonilla asked: ‘Are you the one who’s brought out a book?’ Within minutes, they were sitting in a corner of the room, reading and discussing the novels of Nikolai Gogol. ‘My love began from the first evening,’ admitted Ivan. Would he come and visit Leonilla and her sister some evening? Of course! ‘The soirées of the Lebedev sisters were, for the most part, gay little affairs,’ he recalled; ‘we danced at the piano and, at the same time, the brothers played chess.’ Given the pressures and poverty of his day-to-day life, those evenings provided a much-needed respite.

One evening, he walked Leonilla back home from a gathering at her brother’s apartment: ‘the warm, dark night seemed to cover with a protective veil our peaceful promenade,’ he wrote. ‘Soon her hand found itself by chance in mine . . .’ Discussing her unhappiness under her mother’s iron thumb, they came up with a plan. Leonilla would lodge with an acquaintance, and work as a secretary for Ivan, at a rate of twenty-five roubles a month (nearly half his current income). But when they found themselves sitting close together, their work project gave way to passion.

‘Carried away by her own feeling, she let herself suddenly fall onto my chest,’ wrote Ivan. ‘This unforeseen circumstance completely clouded my reason; my heart started beating like a hammer; my blood boiled and burned my body. A passionate kiss repaid her daring . . . So it is that one

evening our relations, which had been friendly, became amorous; at the end of two or three days, we were husband and wife.'

It was an informal arrangement, but Leonilla's mother was furious: 'When Baron B— and Prince N— ask for your hand, you want to marry a beggar!' So enraged was Mrs Lebedev, she took herself off to the police station, where the police chief informed her that Ivan was very much on the authorities' radar. 'It needs no more than a denunciation against him to expedite him immediately to Siberia!' crowed Ivan's reluctant mother-in-law. But if she thought she could scare her daughter into dropping her lover, she was mistaken: a few days later, Leonilla and Ivan underwent the official marriage ceremony, in a church service attended by a handful of witnesses.

As for the French *conteuses*, so for Ivan: marriage was an unmitigated disaster. 'My love, I can say,' he wrote, 'was only happy before the marriage.' He found Leonilla 'capricious' when he gave her literary work to do, 'she committed the most unpardonable errors', and being accustomed to good living, 'she could not endure the privations which were quite insignificant for me'. In his catalogue of marital woes, one aspect outdid all the others. For nothing appalled Ivan quite as much as his wife's sexual appetite: 'all her forces were concentrated on the most passionate physical love . . . Goodbye my moderation! Goodbye my health!' Reading between the lines, it looks like it was a rough deal for Leonilla, to find her slightest physical approach repulsed by a sexually squeamish man who'd never had an easy relationship with conventional pleasures. In any case, the sex was more than he could cope with: 'A month of such a love,' he reported, 'would have made a healthy man into a corpse . . . This passionate physical love, without brake, wasted my strength.' He found himself in such despair, he considered throwing himself into the sea. In the end, he chose another option: he fled the country.

But Leonilla wasn't to be cast aside so easily.

Enter the Assassin

Ivanushka, Vanya, Ivan the Fool . . . the story collector shared the name common to Russia's folklore heroes. Traditionally, the name of 'fool' was

often given to a youngest child, but in the *skazki* it carries a narrative weight. In ‘Ivan the Fool’ the hero takes the thinnest horse, which happens to be the wisest. In ‘Sandpiper’ a fool called Ivanushka lets himself be duped by Baba Yaga, who steams him in her bathhouse and steals his supernatural gifts, such as a horse that spits out gold, but a magical sandpiper gives him a set of self-activating tongs that enables him to win it all back. The many Ivans of the *skazki* are Russian everymen, fools who tumble in and out of trouble, surviving less by their own resilience than the fortuitous blessings bestowed on them by the forces of nature and magic.

Wry humour spices these tales. Like Giambattista Basile’s Neapolitan *fiabe*, Ivan’s stories catalogue the topsy-turviness of worldly justice, where success depends on unlikely swings of fortune. But unlike the many Ivans who fill his tales, he wasn’t satisfied with blindly following his elders’ commands, and he wanted to challenge the injustices he saw.

‘It astonishes me,’ an acquaintance had remarked, ‘that such a beautiful person has married a man like you.’ Ivan was well aware of the ‘extraordinary contrast between my wife and me. She possessed a rare beauty, a strong and agreeable voice, a sap of overflowing vitality . . . By contrast, it would have been difficult to find a man uglier than me’. Yet they did have one thing in common: they were both constitutionally disposed towards misery.

‘I am so unhappy,’ Leonilla told him, ‘nobody can live with me.’ Stifled in a corset from an early age, trained by her mother to have the slimmest possible waist and the sweetest possible voice, she was a prisoner of her era: ‘all that was good in her,’ noted Ivan, ‘she had acquired in spite of her education’.

This was a rare admission of her individual strengths. When he set off for Geneva in 1865, Leonilla insisted on accompanying him. But he found her even harder to bear, and by his account she was growing increasingly irascible herself: ‘in every individual, man or woman, she noted straight away defects that completely escaped my attention. Not content with burning herself with these people, she wanted to stop me from seeing them as well, because that was her caprice.’

Amongst those Ivan encountered on his journey was the émigré writer Alexander Herzen, a hugely influential figure in the emerging socialist movement, who was based in Geneva. Less impressed than he’d

anticipated, a disillusioned Ivan reported that Herzen ‘lives like a gentleman’ in spite of his socialist teachings, which were ‘mere words’; it didn’t help that Herzen only offered a paltry 150 francs for the new movement Ivan had joined in Russia. According to some accounts, it was at this time that Ivan linked up with ‘The European Committee’, an international revolutionary network whose members shared the goal of establishing republics in their respective nations. Ivan insisted that no such meetings took place, but the files of the tsarist secret police would later identify him as a Russian lynchpin of this network.

He was planning a longer foreign tour, but so strained was his relationship with Leonilla that he ‘resolved to come back sooner to Russia, and to come back alone . . . My wife, not having the means to follow me there, would forget me little by little and love someone else’. So he left her behind and took the train to St Petersburg. At a new peak of despair, he found the return to the fatherland a provoking experience: ‘the richest and most civilised of Russian towns appeared filled with such a large number of cripples and beggars, that at this spectacle the heart of one returning from abroad involuntarily sinks’.

He did at least have a short return to bachelorhood. But he exchanged Leonilla’s company for something far more dangerous – a radical group going by the name the Organisation, with which he’d begun to involve himself shortly before his foreign tour. Its founder was a hereditary noble called Nikolai Ishutin, who had been spreading socialist teachings among the students of Moscow University, and may have given Ivan the funds for his trip to the West.[FN4] As Ivan defined it, the Organisation was ‘a group of young people who had renounced all the joys of life and consecrated themselves to the work of popular emancipation’. Ivan brought his literary contacts and publishing experience along with him, and he was quickly installed as leader of the St Petersburg branch.

In August of that same year, 1865, he published what would prove to be his most controversial work: *A Tutorial for Beginners to Learn to Read and Write*. Ivan had been teaching retired soldiers, artisans and other working-class people for some time, and spreading literacy was a cornerstone of the Organization’s work. ‘It is clear that these lessons in grammar,’ reported the revolutionary activist German Lopatin (who was acquainted with Ivan), ‘which took place in private apartments, were not limited to this modest goal [of literacy], but turned into conversations of a

much more instructive character.' In pursuit of 'overthrowing the existing order', as Ivan admitted to the secret police investigators a year later, the Organization was planning 'libraries that were supposed to open throughout Russia, and at the same time librarians were personally to spread revolutionary ideas'.

On the surface, an instruction manual for working-class readers hardly seems incendiary, and Ivan's publisher managed to squirrel it past the censors. But within two months of publication it was subjected to a ferocious denunciation by a conservative judge. His name was Count Mikhail Muraviev, and Ivan would shortly encounter him in more perilous circumstances. Among the details singled out for concern were a passage 'which sets out a comparison of a person with a monkey' (Charles Darwin had published *On the Origin of the Species* just six years earlier) and an attempt to explain the creation of the world 'contrary to scripture . . . by the action of physical forces over millions of years'.

As you wade through the count's report, you can almost see his eyebrows arching over his pince-nez in indignation. With the book's 'ridicule of religion' and its 'desire to present the superiority of popular government and to humiliate the monarchist principle', it was 'capable of producing the most harmful influence'. And so, declared the judge, 'I cannot help but conclude that it has a criminal orientation and, being at its price (twenty-five kopecks), available to the masses, might lead to the most disastrous consequences.' The police acted swiftly: the printer's office was raided and bookshops scoured for any stray copies, which were immediately impounded.

Given all the barriers Ivan kept crashing against, it's hardly any wonder he fell in with the Organization. Along with the scheme to spread literacy among the masses, he embroiled himself in a plot to liberate political prisoners, arranging false passports and letters of introduction as well as developing ties with journalists at left-leaning periodicals. Ivan would later insist that he only played a minor role in the Organisation. 'Already, at the end of November [1865],' he wrote, 'I had seen Ishutin at Moscow and I begged him not to put me in touch with the other members of the society; but that didn't stop him from sending in succession Nikiforov, Fedoseev, Matkov and Stranden.'

His ambivalence was founded on ideological differences as well as practical considerations. Ivan and Ishutin may have been mutually

inclined towards a socialist revolution, but they had very different philosophies when it came to how it should be brought about. For Ivan, who had witnessed the low level of education in the villages, literacy was the key to progress. He believed, as a fellow conspirator reported, that ‘economic revolution is impossible with the underdevelopment of the common people’. Ishutin, on the other hand, tended to more dramatic measures, and founded a sub-group of the Organisation that went by the name of Hell. Its members swore an oath of allegiance, committing themselves to acts of terror against government officials and wealthy landowners, carrying acid to disfigure themselves after their revolutionary deeds so they couldn’t be identified, as well as poison to kill themselves, and pledging to murder fellow members if they failed to accomplish their tasks.

The activities of Hell would remain hazy. When Ishutin was interrogated in 1866, he insisted it had only been ‘foolish talk under the influence of alcohol’. There wasn’t enough time for its members to prove otherwise, because a member of the Organization turned up in St Petersburg bent on action. His name was Dmitry Karakozov.

‘This one particularly interested me,’ Ivan recalled; ‘his manners and exterior didn’t smell of the snitch’. Quietly spoken, simply dressed, Karakozov had shuffled through various menial jobs, including working alongside Ishutin as a loader for steamers on the Volga. Having been a regular attendee of the Organization’s Moscow meetings, now he presented himself at Ivan’s apartment. In the proclamation that would soon be distributed, Karakozov declared: ‘I read many books about how people lived in earlier times. And what, brothers, did I discover – the tsars are the real culprits.’ It was time, he believed, to do something about it.

Ivan claimed he knew nothing about what Karakozov was planning; that he was embroiled in his own personal dramas, particularly an unexpected delay to a promised loan. But Karakozov would later contradict him, insisting that Ivan was in on his plans and provided him with the money to buy his gun.

On 4 April 1866 Karakozov made his way to the Summer Palace, with poison vials and a proclamation in his pocket. In the palace park, the tsar was returning the greetings of well-wishers. As he stepped onto the boulevard, Karakozov rushed out of the crowd and lifted his double-barrelled flintlock pistol. Security was so loose, the assassin had a clear

shot. But as he pulled the trigger, a drunk hatter's apprentice jogged his arm. The bullet whistled past the tsar's head and embedded itself in the pavement. There would be no second chance: Karakozov was beaten to the ground and dragged forward to be presented to his intended victim.

'What do you want?' asked the tsar.

'Nothing, nothing,' replied Karakozov.

But in his pocket was his proclamation, which spelled out his motivation. It declared:

> I have long been tormented, and given no rest by my doubts why my beloved simple Russian people have to suffer so much! . . . I have looked for the reason for all this in books, and I have found it. The man really responsible is the Tsar . . . He never holds out his hand to the people because he is himself the people's worst enemy.

The would-be assassin had been foiled, but now the state machinery would kick into action, stopping at nothing to track down his accomplices.

Smelling the Russian Soul

The more a storyteller sprinkles into their tales, the more we can learn about them . . . Except when it works the other way.

After each tale in his *Great Russian Fairy Tales*, Ivan added a short note about its origin. 'The Firebird', the opening story, was 'recorded by me from a native of the village of Selina, in the Venevsky district, Tula province'; 'Ivan the Fool' was written down in Kazan, so hastily that he was unable to restore 'the insignificant omissions there turned out to be at the end of the tale'. Of the forty tales included in the first volume, 'All of them were recorded by me,' Ivan insisted in his preface, except for one tale ('Ivan the Fool and His Brothers'), which was communicated in writing by a certain Mr Melkov.

This on-site research method was crucial. Through it, Ivan was able to connect the stories to people's lives, transcending the 'mythological' approach fashionable at the time. 'We don't want to say that the people who created the fairy tales and epics were only expressing their religious attitude to nature and stories about natural phenomena,' he wrote in 1863. 'Not at all; they introduced features of their everyday and historical lives into ready-made material, and forgetting the original meaning of the

myths, they expressed in their legends everything that interested, pleased and satisfied them.'

It is true that many of his tales feature tsars, princes and princesses, and rewards of sumptuous riches for the heroes. But for all their conservative values – which they have in common with most fairy tales – they align with socialist ideas by embedding themselves in the textures of village life. Ivan the Fool, with his bast shoes and rope, catching a magical horse in his father's millet field, is straight out of the villages; but so, in their own way, are royal heroes like the popular Prince Ivan. In one of Ivan Khudiakov's personal favourites, the prince is thrown into a castle dungeon, where he finds himself surrounded by ragged, thickly bearded men who, like him, have dared aspire to the hand of a beautiful princess. He uses his magical accessories – a silver spoon, a golden watch and a magic cup – to conjure a delicious meal and dress everybody in smart clothes. For all his privileges, it's telling that Prince Ivan uses his magic to not only benefit himself but also his fellow prisoners. A prince he may be, but he is also a socialist.

Another Ivan, 'Expensive Ivan', is able to turn himself into any kind of creature – so he and his father set up a scam whereby he becomes a hawk to catch some quails, a dog to hunt a fox and a stallion to fetch a high price in the market. Each sale earns his father an ever larger fee, before the trickster turns himself back into a man and escapes the buyer. The scam carries on until he's bought by a wizard and battles his shape-shifting opponent, outmanoeuvring him when the wizard turns himself into a rooster and Ivan in the form of a falcon kills him.

Imaginative as they may be, these tales are rooted in the practicalities of contemporary rural life (the settings in 'Expensive Ivan', for example, include country fairs and the provincial *zemstvo* court where rural disputes were judged). Read enough of the *skazki* and you can imagine the listeners rubbing their hands between smoke-blackened walls, passing round a pitcher of *kvass*, shushing each other as soon as the *skomorokh* begins. The narratives ramble, the details are inconsistent, the main characters are often unnamed. Many of the tales are very short, lacking the descriptive flourishes that characterise more literary fairy tales. When the heroine finds Baba Yaga's house in 'The Stepdaughter and the Stepmother's Daughter', it is described only as 'a little house on chicken legs' – no glowing skulls on stakes, no sharp teeth for a lock; and the witch is

introduced not by description but by dialogue. ‘Fie, fie, fie!’ she cries. ‘I can smell a Russian soul. What are you up to, girl, doing a deed or fleeing a deed?’ These are formulaic expressions, memory aids to fix the tales in the storytellers’ heads.

Among these formulae, the most telling is the one that ends many tales:

> I was there,
> I drank honey-beer,
> It flowed down my moustache,
> But none got in my mouth.

As a storyteller, Ivan is the other end of the spectrum from the bombastic Giambattista Basile; but they were both celebrating the oral culture that supplied their tales. ‘I left, one foot after the other, with a little spoonful of honey,’ wrote Giambattista at the end of his collection. Both storytellers recognised that scratching a living can be hell for old-school tellers of tales.

‘The Stepdaughter and the Stepmother’s Daughter’ has correspondences with a German tale told to the Grimms by Dortchen Wild, ‘Mother Hölle’ (as well as with Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve’s long tale, ‘The Naiads’), but the version recorded by Ivan was fully Russianised. The river leading into the forest depicts the porous Russian landscape where forests are typically swampier than in western Europe; the witch tells her volunteer to stoke her bathhouse, a typical outbuilding in rural Russia; and when the tasks have been fulfilled they drink tea from a samovar. The witch’s ritual phrase is another localising detail: ‘I can smell a Russian soul.’ Baba Yaga, the goddess-witch of the Russian forest, only involves herself with Russians. Some she burns, some she rewards with trunks of gold, but her tests are for Russians. In Baba Yaga’s world, as recorded by the Russian tale collectors, nobody else matters.[FN5]

But the stories also evoke Russia’s Asian identity and its proximity to the Tartar and Turkic steppes. The name of the villain Khoshchey the Deathless, for example, is derived from a Turkic word for ‘prisoner’ (a role in which he is frequently found, released by the hapless Prince Ivan, who subsequently has to fight him); and Baba Yaga evokes the shamans who still operate in many societies on Russia’s fringe, and were reflected in turn by the *skomorokhi*, with their bearskins, masks and habit of plunging into trances. If any of this was alien to metropolitan, Western-

leaning Russians, it certainly wouldn't have been to Ivan. 'Scratch a Russian and you will find a Tartar,' declared Napoleon, for to be Russian was also to be Asian. Which is certainly true of the *skazki*.

So much about rural life in Russia can be gleaned from these stories because Ivan got down and dirty, pulling his stories closer to the roots than any other story collector. According to the great Russian scholar Vladimir Propp, 'Khudiakov was interested in folklore not just as a folklorist. He aspired to put folklore in the service of revolutionary activity and to use it as propaganda material. With this goal, he studied folklore not from books but by immediate communication with people.' There's an overlap here with the aspiration of the Brothers Grimm, which they proclaimed but were unable to fulfil – collecting tales by 'immediate communication with the people' – which is why Ivan has a claim to being one of the most authentic of all tale collectors.

As Propp wrote, he was driven by ideology. It ruled his life choices as well as his story collecting. For Ivan, Russia wasn't changing fast enough. For the establishment, matters were hurtling out of control and it was time to put on the dampers. Many would fall in the emergency braking that ensued, their minds and bodies crushed, and Ivan would be among the casualties.

The Tale of the Firebird

Every night, a golden apple is stolen from a tree in the royal garden. So the king promises half his kingdom to whichever of his three sons catches the thief. His oldest son keeps watch under the tree, but falls asleep, and in the morning another apple is missing; the same happens with the middle son. But the youngest son, Ivan, is braver and more alert. Late at night, he sees a beautiful bird sitting on a bough, its wings as bright as fire. It flies out of his grasp, but he manages to pull off a single glowing feather.

Whoever catches the Firebird, declares the king, will have not just half but all of his kingdom. So the brothers ride to a crossroads. There are three roads. According to an inscription, the left side leads to death, the middle road to hunger, the right side to your horse's hunger. The older brothers can't make up their minds which road to take, but Ivan sets off on the middle path.

It leads him to a hut on chicken legs, where he finds a fearsome Baba Yaga, with a nose so long it sticks through her ceiling. Ivan's threats force her to feed him and give him a ball of string, which will enable him to ascend a mountain. She directs him to her sister, another Baba Yaga, who gives him a comb that can whip up a forest; and a third Baba Yaga gives him a brush that conjures a river of fire.

At last, Ivan finds the Firebird, locked in a golden cage behind many gates and fences. He vaults these barriers and seizes the cage, but a clamour of ringing bells unleashes a pack of ferocious lions and an army of soldiers. Chased to a mountain, Ivan loosens the ball of string, then keeps his assailants back with an impenetrable forest, magicked by the comb. The soldiers hack at the trees with their axes, only to face a river of fire. Thanks to the Baba Yagas' gifts, Ivan rides back to the crossroads, where he finds his brothers, still idling around. But they want the glory of capturing the Firebird, so they throw him into a ditch and seize the cage.

Scrabbling in the dirt, Ivan fends off reptiles and creepy-crawlies, and hauls himself back to the surface. In a nearby city, he learns that a beautiful princess is about to be devoured by a many-headed serpent. He

may not have a sword, but all he needs is three bundles of sticks. Swinging them from end to end, he cuts off the serpent's six heads. The grateful king grants his daughter's hand in marriage, as well as a magic crow that flies Prince Ivan and his bride to his father's palace.

There, Ivan's brothers have been trying to claim the credit for capturing the Firebird. But their boasts aren't very convincing since the magical bird's feathers have darkened to the blackness of a crow. Only when Ivan arrives does the Firebird regain its natural glow. He kisses his father's hand, reveals the truth and presents his wife, and his father rewards him with the reins of the kingdom. As for Ivan's dastardly brothers, they are kicked into the fields to spend their days looking after the cows.

Chapter 15

The Hangman's Wrath

Within forty-eight hours of Dmitry Karakozov's botched assassination attempt, there was a knock on the door of Ivan's apartment.

'I am come to your home,' announced the local police commissioner, 'on the order of the commission initiated by his Imperial Majesty.'

'Enchanted,' Ivan replied. 'What can I do for you?'

Bundled into a carriage, he was taken to the police station of the Third Section (the tsarist secret police), where a carpet-bag full of papers and a parcel of photographs from his apartment were systematically scrutinised. The officers, Ivan insisted, 'found nothing compromising. On the other hand, I had noted on many pages some very bizarre folk tales, some riddles, some proverbs. During several evenings, the reading of these pages afforded a particular pleasure to certain members of the Third Section.'

Since Karakozov's attempt on the tsar's life, the secret police had gone into overdrive, and dozens had been arrested. A syringe containing strychnine had been found on the assassin, along with morphine and a bottle of prussic acid. Who had supplied these articles, the officers wanted to know. Who had instigated the coup? For three months, Ivan was kept in a cell, given 'food that dogs wouldn't want to eat', subjected to two or three interrogations a day. Each session began and ended with the same question:

'Did you direct the coup?'

But the inquiry didn't limit itself to the practical details of the assassination attempt. Political ideology was the driving force behind the attempt – an ideology the establishment was struggling to grasp – so the officers probed Ivan's literary activities. 'Your book has been forbidden by the government,' pointed out one of the interrogators. 'You see, the preaching of your ideas, of your principles, has brought you to connect

yourself with these people who you are now renouncing.' More dangerously, the judge appointed to the case, Count Muraviev, was already familiar with Ivan's work. 'Muraviev believes in your guilt,' one of the interrogators told him, 'founding it in the *Tutorial* [published the previous year]; you have propagated ideas tending to the destruction of religion and the government.'

Rapidly, and disastrously, 'a veritable flood of accusations rained on my head'. Ivan's brother-in-law, Vladimir Lebedev (whose mother was still furious at her daughter's marriage) claimed 'that I had always been an agitator . . . that everywhere and always, I had made propaganda of my ideas'. Booksellers agreed that Ivan was peddling 'revolutionary' material, and conservative newspapers condemned him in their editorials. Even more catastrophic, from the legal point of view, was the collapse of solidarity between members of the Organisation. One of them, Matkov, insisted Ivan had been the ringleader and would be a thorn in his side throughout the trial. Karakozov himself, after several days of aggressive questioning, said that Ivan had given him the money for his pistol and knew what he was planning. No longer was it a question of whether he would be found guilty, but how harsh his sentence would be.

'The position of all men fallen into the hands of the Third Section resembles those of the heroes which are the subject of the tales,' wrote Ivan.

> The hero pursues his goal by long and unknown routes, so that on every side the evil spirit tries to frighten him with terrifying apparitions . . . If the hero only turns his head, the demon triumphs and shreds him to pieces; but if, despite his fear, he follows his way without looking behind him, he happily attains his goal at last, and the evil spirit, seeing itself vanquished, disappears with a savage cry . . . It is in this situation that I found myself.

All very well if you're a paragon of bravery like Prince Ivan; but as Ivan admitted, 'I was not a hero.' Weakened by the rigours of his daily life, he was pummelled by the interrogations and the privations of an imprisonment in which he was 'condemned to serve as food for lice'. It was a relief of sorts when the trial finally began, in July 1866.

Spanning the course of two months, what followed was a game-changer for the Russian legal system: it was the first time defendants in a political trial were defended by attorneys. Modernisation had altered so much of Ivan's world, and now it had made it to the courts. But if it was going to

save his life, he would need the best representation possible. With Count Muraviev as judge – ominously nicknamed ‘the hangman’ because of all the dissidents he’d dispatched, a man who’d personally excoriated Ivan’s work a year earlier – the odds weren’t exactly in his favour.

Muraviev insisted Ivan was the ringleader of the plot, claiming he was ‘well known for his malicious teachings’ and placing him at the heart of a revolutionary network stretching from western Europe to Siberia, connecting him with Polish separatists in the Russian borderlands as well as émigrés agitators like Alexander Herzen. The count wasn’t alone in hurling these accusations: an editorial in the *Moscow News* insisted Ivan was ‘incomparably more important than all of Karakozov’s Moscow comrades put together’, and not only Muraviev but also the court prosecutor recommended the death penalty. The case against him was so severe, his own defence lawyer, Gayevsky, conceded that he doubted he would have time to read all the depositions before they went to trial. ‘I do not know what I can do in the face of such accusations,’ Ivan recalled him saying, in a moment of pre-trial defeatism. Ivan was denounced by a couple of his fellow prisoners, the judges routinely displayed open hostility towards him, and he wasn’t helped by his own taciturn demeanour and habit of nervous laughter. After one particularly gruelling session, he burst into tears in the court garden, convinced he was going to hang.

In the indictment, Ivan was described as ‘a man of an extremely socialist direction, an enemy of the existing order’. Anti-establishment, anti-monarchist, socialist, atheist, critic of reforms, advocate of mass literacy: he may have been all these things, but he wasn’t as active a revolutionary as Ishutin or Karakozov, and in Gayevsky he benefitted from a spirited defence (‘he displayed the greatest passion in defending my cause’, as Ivan recalled, adding that ‘it is to his zeal that I owe my life’). Of all the conspirators, only Karakozov was executed (the death sentence pronounced against Ishutin was commuted to transportation at the last moment, when he was standing on the scaffold with the noose around his neck). But the penal judgment wasn’t much of a reprieve. Ivan was sentenced to exile in ‘the furthest places in Siberia’. Leonilla, brought to visit him one last time, offered to accompany him, with a touching loyalty that Ivan didn’t hesitate to spurn. Neither her refusal to give the authorities any incriminating evidence against him nor the fact that she was pregnant could move him, and so she was left to raise their child alone and

disappear into history's shadows; Ivan, meanwhile, found himself in a prisoners' convoy on the 'Iron Road' to Siberia.

The immediate impact of the case was a subsidence of the rights won during the decade of reform. In May 1866, a month after the assassination attempt, Tsar Alexander signed into law his 'Commitment to the protection of the Russian people from false and harmful doctrines that, lest their promulgation be halted, might in time shake the foundations of society'. Or, to put it another way: no more 'Alexander the Liberator'. In a crackdown that would be known as 'the White Terror', journalists were arrested, progressive publications like *The Russian Word* and *Contemporary* were closed down, bookshops were sifted for incendiary material, access to archives was restricted and any form of 'nihilist' fashion outlawed. 'Every day,' wrote one of Ivan's acquaintances, a journalist called Grigory Eliseev, 'news arrived that this or that literary man had been taken during the night'.

For the scholar Claudia Verhoeven, 'Terrorism virtually emerged from the Russian autocracy's mishandling of April 4, 1866 . . . When over the course of the next decade this specter began to haunt, first, the Russian empire, and, thereafter, the rest of the world, the form in which it did so was directly determined by the government's earliest representation of Karakozov's unprecedented political challenge.' By this definition, the man who wandered the villages of Russia searching for ancient tales of wonder had transformed into a central cog in the invention of a very modern phenomenon: terrorism.

To a Land of Broken Souls

'So this is the transportation,' wrote Ivan, 'I thought, today, you get a typhoid fever and tomorrow you're transported to the other world.'

Setting out to nineteenth-century Siberia was nobody's idea of a journey to paradise. In October snowfall, two convoys left St Petersburg with six prisoners each, two policemen for each convict and a senior officer per convoy. Travelling relentlessly, pausing only for a few hours' rest each day, the prisoners were billeted to 'the meanest rooms' in the towns where they broke up their journey. Crossing a land of frost-glazed fields and

ashen hills, where the rivers were grey worms wriggling out of the cocoons of low-hanging snow clouds, they spent their nights shivering under scanty cloaks, lying on bare ground under broken windows rattled by the wind. Some days passed without anything to eat, and when a sympathetic guard went to ferret out some food, his senior officer reprimanded him: ‘If they starve, it’s none of your business.’

With his health already dicey, Ivan fell ill before they reached the eastern Siberian headquarters of Irkutsk. He was carried into hospital by his fellow convicts and given a purgative. Never the sturdiest physical specimen, now he was little more than a walking skeleton, a twenty-four-year-old drained of all youthful vigour. But he was still treated as a menace, ‘a sort of hero’, as he put it, ‘capable of exterminating a whole detachment with a single punch’. When officers came to transport him to his final destination, they had to be discouraged by an official from putting him in chains, and he was searched for any dangerous weapons. Separated from his fellow convicts, who were sent to the Merchinsk mines near Lake Baikal, Ivan was driven across the permafrost towards one of the remotest spots in Siberia. One of the officers insisted his fate was ‘worse than forced labour’.

‘Few of my readers,’ wrote Ivan, ‘have seen anything more deserted than the route that goes from Irkutsk to Yakutsk.’ Due to the prisoner’s reputation, his Cossack guards were supposed to have their swords bared. In the end they kept them sheathed because the frost was so severe it would have damaged the steel. In the final part of the journey, Ivan was accompanied to the remote habitation of Verkhoyansk by a local *apparatchik*, Trofimov, who reported with some surprise on the prisoner’s high spirits: ‘Khudiakov was cheerful and sang nearly all the time; only approaching Verkhoyansk did he start displaying some fatigue.’

It was a sign of Ivan’s increasingly erratic state of mind. His memoir ends with his arrival in Verkhoyansk, leaving little ambiguity about his fragile condition:

> To live with the cows, to suffer hunger . . . to have, not more than once a year, any news of your dear parents and most intimate friends, waiting for entire months and to see nothing coming at the end of this time; at last, to think of the terrible evils of the fatherland . . . the man capable of feeling will understand what terrible feelings must accompany my life . . .

In Verkhoyansk, he found himself in a community of just 164 people, along with a priest, a nurse and a policeman. He was billeted with a local family, living in austere simplicity in their yurt. He would remain there for the next eight years.

Dispiriting though his surroundings were, and despite occasional bouts of depression, those early years of exile inspired a surprising renewal. Without political activities to distract him, Ivan threw himself back into folklore. It took him just a year to master the Yakut language. Over time, he compiled a Yakuti–Russian dictionary, listened to local storytellers, wrote down folk tales, songs, riddles, proverbs and the Yakuti epic, and produced a study of Yakuti culture that is still valued by ethnographers today.

‘ “Say-sing a tale,” they say to the storyteller,’ he noted. ‘And the storyteller begins to sing and speak a whole epic in which many gods, devils and heroes are mentioned; the descriptions of various places are extremely detailed . . .’ He was struck by the precision and stamina of the Yakuti storytellers, noting they told fairy tales ‘even more vividly than Russian storytellers’ and describing a storytelling contest between two champion bards who ‘sang and spoke for a whole day, and their voices grew louder and louder until at last they both fell exhausted and fell in a deep sleep.’

How dumbfounded his detractors would have been to see this peddler of ‘malicious thinkings’ producing valuable work at the hellish extremity of Russia. Along with his cultural projects, Ivan set up a school and a meteorological station (which enabled him to confirm that he was living in the coldest town on earth – he recorded a temperature of minus 63.2 degrees Celsius in December 1868).

I find it moving to read about these activities. They show a troubled misfit refusing to be defined by his political misadventures, refusing to let his curiosity be stifled, still asking questions in spite of all the knocks he’d taken. But his intellectual activities only tell a part of the story. They were the last flarings of an embattled mind on which depression was exerting an ever-tightening hold.

In the spring of 1869, when Ivan had been in Verkhoyansk for two years, a worrying change was noticed. According to a man called Gorokhov, a parish clerk who became one of Ivan’s closest acquaintances, ‘he suddenly became taciturn and gloomy, sat silently and struck down all our

suggestions with refusals'. Increasingly erratic, unable to sleep, losing his appetite, Ivan was drawing renewed attention from the authorities. On 23 March 1871 the chief of police in Verkhoyansk reported that he suffered from 'mild insanity', adding that 'his illness is increasing more and more'.

Ivan needed help. But suspicion was so deeply entrenched among the authorities, they held off making a decision. The governor general of Siberia was wary that he might be faking his illness with the aim of 'loosening suspicion over him and then even escaping'. Only in December 1873 did the governor general request permission from the Third Section to move him to Irkutsk. Although this was granted, it took another eight months before anything was done.

'Khudiakov's mental capacity is out of order,' declared the inspecting physician on 31 August 1874. In a more detailed report, the same doctor recorded: 'he starts without any reason on long and endless discourses on various subjects . . . he has a fairly good memory of names and events, and he speaks not without meaning, but in the presentation of thoughts there is no consistency and clarity' and he 'sometimes expresses obvious absurdities'.

In July 1875 Ivan arrived in Irkutsk and was installed in the ward for the mentally ill at the Kuznetsovsky Hospital. He filled his days writing obsessively, following a method he had devised, from right to left and sometimes from the bottom of the page to the top. His mother was allowed to visit, and those meetings must have been precious, if painful on both sides. She had been appealing for access to her son ever since he was sentenced; sadly, she was in poor health herself, and died a few months after his arrival in Irkutsk. Another visitor, who left a rare testimonial, was a fellow revolutionary exile, N. P. Goncharov. He reported 'the appearance of a primitive creature . . . words, without getting stuck, rushed intensely in the disorderly chaos. Everything black, gloomy, flooded his once bright thoughts'.

Hallucinations had become commonplace. Ivan cried out at night, haunted by visions of his mother's suffering eyes; at other times he was heard repeating words from his trial. He remained in the mental ward for just over a year until he died on 19 September 1876, aged thirty-four. His body was dumped, alongside a couple of corpses from the hospital's anatomy theatre, into an unmarked grave, in the part of the cemetery reserved for criminals and vagrants.

And so it goes . . . An active, creative life swallowed by insanity at the worst end of Siberia. Not everybody comes back from Baba Yaga's hut with treasure; some bring back fire that burns them up. As Baba Yaga herself warns, 'if people are too inquisitive, I eat them'. Ivan Khudiakov was somebody who asked a lot of questions, and didn't always know what to do with the answers. He lived during an information revolution – and as with other ages when information becomes available on an unprecedented scale, the suspicion of the authorities was marshalled against it. Ivan believed that information and knowledge should be available to everybody, which is why he wrote his *Tutorial for Beginners to Learn to Read and Write*. He didn't collect tales from the past because of antiquarian or romantic motivations; nor was he particularly driven by nationalistic zeal, or a desire to heap up pots of money. 'All the people who taught the books of Khudiakov in the public schools,' wrote the revolutionary activist German Lopatin shortly after Ivan's death, 'unanimously assured me of their extraordinary success and the extraordinary love with which both young and adult students treated these books.'

This is a partisan view, for Lopatin knew Ivan and shared his political vision. But a notice in the Russian Geographical Society's report for 1863 offers a more detached perspective. Recommending a medal for Ivan's collection of folk riddles, N. V. Kalachev wrote: 'This commission was fulfilled by Khudiakov with that distinctness and love in the task which distinguishes his own editions . . . To Mr Khudiakov's credit we can add that the same ardent love for his subject leads him, despite his meagre funds, to undertake travel across Russia every summer.'

It's a crying shame – and it's also shameful – that these institutions didn't do more to support his talents. All too often, he was pushed aside by the cultural gatekeepers he encountered – library directors, lecturers, university rectors. More than any of the nineteenth-century story collectors whose fame would far exceed his own, Ivan's story collecting was a raw engagement with the oral traditions in which those tales were created. Across Europe, other folklorists were harvesting tales from oral sources, increasingly alert to the voices and lives of the people who told their tales: collectors like Emmanuel Cosquin, who picked up stories from a village in Lorraine, transmitting them unedited, much like Ivan (and publishing them in 1860, the same year as Ivan's first collection). They were responding to the growing awareness of the unwritten cultural

treasures stored for many centuries in places that had been ignored by the elites.

Spurred by the growth of nationalist consciousness and socialist philosophy, this awareness would ripple across the century. Slavic activists like the Czech author Karel Jaromír Erben harnessed folk tales as part of a wider campaign for political autonomy; left-wing thinkers in Britain, such as William Morris, C. Allen Clarke and Keir Hardie (who would found the Labour Party at the turn of the twentieth century) composed their own fairy tales, recognising their subversive and didactic potential.

In the context of these wider activities, Ivan's achievement wasn't unique. But there was an authentic intensity to his work and life that deserves particular attention. His *Tutorial* was key to this: he wasn't simply taking the fruit of the folk to display it to the elites; he strove to show that fruit to the people who'd grown it, to celebrate their culture with them.

The great twentieth-century folklorist Vladimir Propp described Ivan's *Great Russian Fairy Tales* as 'the first major collection of folk tales taken straight from the people's mouth'. That was certainly the case in Russia, where he paved the way for later folklore collectors. Amongst these were the remarkable mathematician and actress Olga Ozarovskaya, who, when she wasn't teaching drama in her studio in Moscow in the 1910s and 1920s, roamed the countryside collecting folk tales; and the ill-fated Nikolai Onchukov, who travelled thousands of miles by sleigh, horse and foot, collecting stories in the early years of the twentieth century, but who crashed against state obstacles and after multiple arrests died in a labour camp. When it came to the *skazki*, Ivan provided a blueprint, it turned out: not only for methodology but also for the tragic lives of many of their collectors.

Fairy tale history has produced many eccentrics, but few as contradictory as Ivan. He's the teller who shows us how dangerous fairy telling can be. The image of Ivan in Siberia, his mind going to pieces, haunts me. It shows that even for fairy tellers – *especially for fairy tellers!* – the world is far from cosy. And, notably, he isn't the last fairy-telling madman we'll be meeting on this trail.

But at least we know Ivan's story, told in his own words, however badly it disintegrated towards the end. Now it's time to turn to the most enigmatic of our fairy tellers – the one furthest away in time and, for

Western readers, in place. The *skazki* pull the fairy tale out of its Western comfort zone, but now we're stretching even further. South from the Siberian tundra we travel, as if we're sitting on Ivan the Fool's magic carpet, floating over the steppes of Central Asia, over the Pamir Mountains and the Karakoram, alighting in the Himalayas in the Valley of Kashmir, where the sub-zero winter temperatures force the locals to squeeze their heads inside woollen hats as thick and ear-flapped as the ones in Siberia. There's a key difference, however: we're turning away from hell, swinging up, up, up, with a storyteller who understood the pits of the earth but could gaze unblinkingly at the heavens.

PART SIX

A Valley Haunted by Demons

Those who drink from the immortality of this story shall have their obstacles removed and shall be prosperous and Shiva's grace will bestow godliness on them, even as they live here on earth.

Somadeva, *The Ocean of the Streams of Story* (*circa* 1070 AD)

The Tale of the Golden City

‘Whoever has seen the Golden City,’ announces a palace warden, ‘may claim the princess’s hand in marriage.’

It’s a bewitching prospect for a gambler called Saktideva, so he decides to try his luck. But he’s never actually seen the Golden City and he’s unable to pull off his scam – the king’s daughter knows he’s lying and has him booted out of the palace. In that case, Saktideva decides, he’s going to find this mysterious city and show them all. So off he sets, directed by a forest hermit to seek out a king of fishermen in the middle of the ocean. The ship he boards is torn apart in a storm and he’s swallowed by a giant fish. Which turns out to be fortuitous. The fish is cut open and he’s greeted by the very man he’s been seeking – the king of the fishermen.

Not that his new friend knows the location of the Golden City – but he’s eager to help Saktideva in his search. So they voyage together, sailing past a giant banyan tree growing out of the sea. But their ship is blown into a whirlpool and everybody is sucked under, except for Saktideva, who clings to a branch of the banyan tree and hauls himself into its canopy. There he rests in despair, until he hears a magical talking bird telling its fellow birds about the Golden City. Here is his chance, so he hides himself in its feathers and is carried to the very place he has yearned for.

At last! Clambering off the bird’s back, he’s surrounded by pillars of precious stones and golden walls. A beautiful princess presides over the Golden City, and decides to marry him. All she has to do is check with her father, in a faraway forest. She leaves Saktideva in the palace, warning him not to visit the middle terrace. Which, as soon as she’s gone, is exactly what he does.

A shocking discovery awaits: three dead princesses are lying in the middle terrace. One of them Saktideva recognises: the princess who kicked him out of the palace back home. He’s musing on these discoveries beside a lake when he’s buffeted into the water by a horse; and on pulling himself out, he finds himself back in his home city.

‘Who has seen,’ declares the palace warden, ‘the Golden City?’

This time Saktideva can give a truthful answer. He marches to the palace and tells the princess he saw her dead body on the forbidden terrace. Now the truth comes out: she's a celestial maiden, a *vidyadhara*,* cursed by an angry hermit to dwell in human form. Saktideva's revelation releases her from the curse, and she disappears. But before she fades away, she prophesies that Saktideva will marry not only her but her three sisters as well. Emboldened by this tantalising prospect, he sets out again for the Golden City.

There are more adventures along the way: captured by the king of the fishermen's grieving sons, Saktideva is due to be sacrificed at a temple to the fearsome goddess Durga, but their sister releases him and insists he marry her. Later, he chases a giant boar into a cave, rescues a beautiful maiden (who was the demon-boar's prisoner), marries her as well, and when she's due to give birth a heavenly voice orders him to cut the baby out of her belly. The blood-soaked baby turns into a sword, which carries Saktideva to the Golden City, along with his two wives. There he meets the princess who posed the original riddle as well as the princess from his first visit.

Now he has four wives and the blessing of their father, who hands over the reins of the magical city to Saktideva, along with the gift of immortality. And so the former gambler, once caught out for his fibs, lives in everlasting bliss with his four celestial brides.

* 'Holders of knowledge', the vidyadharas are spirits of the air, a class of minor deities in Hindu mythology inhabiting the region between the earth and the sky.

Chapter 16

Somadeva

We can scroll through the centuries looking for the roots of fairy tales, but no matter how far back we go, there's always another beginning over the horizon, like the many wonders witnessed by the reformed gambler Saktideva on his way to the Golden City. This trail started with Giambattista Basile's *Tale of Tales*, because we can follow his stories on a detectable path to the famous stories – such as 'Cinderella', 'Sleeping Beauty' and 'Rapunzel' – that most readers will recognise.

But if we want a fuller perspective of the fairy tale, we need to widen our scope. Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries might be prime time for the global mainstream, but clamber outside these parameters and there are plenty more tales to find. When the French folklorist Emmanuel Cosquin was digging up tales in Lorraine in the 1850s, he suggested they could be traced to Indian originals; and the contemporary critic Theodore Benfey insisted that 'a great number of folk tales and stories from India have been disseminated almost over the whole world'. Not only are the Indian tales fascinating in their own right; as we shall see, their traces can be found in the work of some of Europe's most celebrated storytellers, such as Boccaccio and Chaucer. Even more palpable is their imprint on Middle Eastern literature, especially *The Thousand and One Nights*. With their Hindu mythology and Indian geography, these stories can be hard to glean for those of us unfamiliar with their milieu. And yet, if we peel away the local textures, we find many features common to fairy tale collections all over the world.

The book to which we are turning has witches (although they go by a range of titles) and beautiful women transformed into swans or bursting out of flowers; it has heroes scooped out of giant fish, flying through the air in magical contraptions and fetching up in otherworldly kingdoms ruled by never-ageing beauties. It is known as the *Kathasaritsagara*, or

The Ocean of the Streams of Story, and it splashes so many stories together that its title is fully justified. Although it was written, in Sanskrit, in the eleventh century, and translated into Persian (first in the fifteenth century, and later under the orders of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, in the sixteenth), it wasn't until the nineteenth century that Western readers became conscious of the *Ocean*, part of the widening of global literary awareness that followed the development of comparative literature by folklorists like the Grimms.[FN1]

The author of this mercurial book was a Brahmin called Somadeva Bhatta, a court poet in the valley of Kashmir, who tells us in his book that he was the son of a man called Ramadeva, and very little else. Of all our tellers, he is the hardest to unbury, and he'd be out of reach completely if it weren't for the sheer volume of tales he left behind. For his book contains more than 21,000 *shlokas* (the couplets of classical Indian verse), divided into 124 *tarangas* (or 'billows'). That's twice as long as the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* combined – roughly the length of *The Lord of the Rings.*

Included in this ream are dozens of tales that have much in common with the fairy tales of Europe and the Middle East. We see a prince landing on the roof of a seraglio in a pair of stolen magic shoes, carrying a beautiful princess away from her father's guards – a plot that would be repeated in *The Thousand and One Nights* tale 'The Ebony Horse'. We eavesdrop with an unhappy princess on a flesh-eating demon who reveals the secret cure for an ailing king, a narrative echoed in Giambattista Basile's 'Green Meadow'. Any doubts about classifying such tales alongside Western fairy tales are flattened by 'The Golden City', about the gambler Saktideva's adventure to a lavish supernatural city via a shipwreck and a magical bird, the prohibition against him visiting the middle terrace, and the enchanted maidens who live there; a tale that anticipates 'Bluebeard', the first and second voyages of Sindbad, the Baroness d'Aulnoy's 'The Island of Happiness' and most directly 'The City of Gold' (a story recited by Hanna Dyab to Antoine Galland in Paris in 1709 that, for all its differences, is clearly related, and was adapted in Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Travelling Companion'). To read these tales in Somadeva's collection is to experience the free-wheeling vitality of stories younger than other versions we know, and older than we could possibly imagine.

But so richly interwoven are the stories, entangled so intricately with religious and mythical resonances, it's risky to pin any one of them as a pure fairy tale. There are bawdy sex comedies, discourses on Sanskrit grammar, animal fables, adaptations from the Indian epics, parables narrated for the illustration of moral lessons, and the story of a poet who writes in his own blood. As Somadeva puts it, 'I have not made this attempt through desire of a reputation for ingenuity, but in order to facilitate the recollection of a multitude of various tales.' Here is the *Ocean*'s operating principle: derived from previous sources and surging with story. 'Every stream of myth and mystery,' wrote N. M. Penzer in the preface to the most comprehensive English edition (published 1924–8), 'flowing down from the snowy heights of sacred Himalaya would sooner or later reach the Ocean, other streams from other mountains would do likewise, till at last fancy would create an ocean full of stories of every conceivable description.' This sense of tumult and spate is essential to the *Ocean*: for this is where we find stories at their most fluid, overlapping each other, seeping across chapters and volumes, winding around each other, eroding all centrality, pulling leading characters under, to be replaced by the next voice delivering the next tale – who could be a god, a gambler, a sorceress-queen, a corpse-animating zombie riding on a king's back, a royal minister, a scripture-reading parrot, a monkey who used to be a man, a constructor of wooden automata, a merchant who made his fortune out of a dead mouse . . . It's a strangely modern feeling, reading the *Ocean*'s recursive loop of storytelling. In its interconnecting, narrative promiscuity, its relentless polyphony, it feels like surfing the Web.

Trouble in Paradise

The royal hall of Vijayeshwara, in Kashmir, round about the year 1070 ad: here we find our poet, his shoulders draped in a nutmeg-scented woollen cloak, conch shell bangles rattling on his wrists. Around him are courtiers and attendants, their mouths red with chewed betel leaves, dizzy with the beating of the tabor and liquor made from sugar cane. The men have earrings and flowers in their hair, the women are perfumed with camphor, their feet and lips painted red with lac, their eyes darkened with collyrium. At the heart of this audience, reclining on a leather-cushioned couch,

fanned by a punkah-wallah with a yak-tail fly whisk, is the poet's patron: Queen Suryavati.

'In order to interest somewhat for a moment the mind of that queen,' Somadeva tells us at the close of his great work, 'this summary of the Brihat-Katha's essence, consisting of the ambrosia of diverse tales, a full moon [attracting] the ocean of good men's minds, was verily composed by Soma, the son of Rama, a worthy Brahmin, agreeable because of his abounding virtues.'

There is a subtle tension in his claims for his storytelling: he denies originality, insisting he's merely adapting an earlier (but now lost) book called the *Brihat-Katha*, the 'Great Story', by an ancient writer known as Gunadhya, who was said to have written his tales in his own blood: 'the book,' Somadeva assures us, 'is precisely on the model of that from which it is taken, there is not even the slightest deviation, only such language is selected as tends to abridge the prolixity of the work.' We've heard this kind of claim before – it's what the Grimms said of the stories they'd set down. But just as they would modify their tales over the years, so it was with Somadeva. Although he wasn't the only poet to adapt the 'Great Story', his version came out substantially longer than any of the others.[FN2]

The length of the collection is an essential part of its identity, its function and purpose. As the Indian writer Gayathri Prabhu, who has written a recent adaptation (her book, *Vetaal and Vikram: Riddles of the Undead*, published in 2019, winds a group of the stories around their translation by the formidable scholar-adventurer Sir Richard Burton in the mid nineteenth century), put it to me:

> Somadeva is clearly a storyteller's storyteller, and his stories are peppered with storytellers. A storyteller, for Somadeva, is equally an entertainer, a character, and in turn a listener to the storytellers within each of their stories. This matrix of storytelling is a very dynamic, vibrant, all-consuming thing. In some ways, it is not about the story, but the storytelling experience itself, as much about new narrative momentum, as it is about whiling away time.

But why was it so important to while away so much time? Why was Somadeva obliged to distract his queen from other affairs? Skim the surface of the *Ocean* and we're in for a sumptuous ride, among romancing lovers who flirt with each other in lotus lakes, giant talking birds and flying elephants, swans encrusted with diamonds, a woman who turns her lover into a monkey so she can keep him as her pet . . . But if we delve into

the times that Somadeva and his queen were living through, we can start to understand why it was so important for him ‘to interest somewhat for a moment the mind of that queen’.

Officially, the kingdom of Kashmir was an earthly paradise: ‘the land which was hallowed by Vishnu the bow-handed god’, as Somadeva puts it. Thickly furred, rich in pine and birch and other alpine vegetation, adorned with lush meadows watered by the tributaries of the mighty Indus, discretely isolated from other kingdoms by its position between the Greater Himalayas and the range of Pir Panjal, it was a valley renowned for its beauty. ‘Kashmir is in the forefront of prosperous lands,’ wrote Somadeva’s fellow spinner of the same tales, Kshemendra, in the same century. ‘Adorned by savants and sages, it even humbles the pride of paradise.’ Even today, there’s a sense of separation and superiority about this troubled valley, when two nations, two armies, and two faiths wrangle over its status, splitting the region in half. As you wind along the narrow mountain roads, screw-backing over the Punjab, military jeeps roll around the hill stations and rhyming, punning signs guide you over the Banihal Pass: NO RACE NO RALLY ENJOY THE VALLEY! BE MR LATE NOT LATE MR! A nearly unbroken chain of mountain ranges locks out the outside world, and you plunge into the capital of Srinagar, where narrow paddle boats slide across Dal Lake under the snarling snow-capped mountains, lotus discs gleaming under the quivering of kingfishers and the heart-shaped paddles of the low-bodied *doongas*. Colour washes the valley – bursts of yellow and blood red on the *boonyi* trees in autumn, the flower-strewn meadows of Khelmarg, the purple-topped turnips and lush green spinach in the floating vegetable markets, the khaki hill overlooking Dal Lake, where the sand-coloured ninth-century temple of Shankaracharya raises its spire to Shiva above 250 lung-squeezing steps, and you stagger between marigold-wearing sadhus in yellow lungis and worshippers in brightly coloured saris, before floating back across the lake on a *shikara* decorated with paint and garnished with red dahlias.

The difference in Kashmir is one of attitude as much as altitude. ‘They are particularly anxious,’ the eleventh-century scholar al-Biruni noted of the Kashmiris, ‘about the strength of their country, and therefore take always much care to keep a strong hold upon the entrances and roads leading into it. In consequence it is very difficult to have any commerce with them.’ No wonder they guarded it so jealously – for this region was

described by Somadeva as a ‘Nandana’, a terrestrial paradise. Which explains why so many armies launched themselves on the valley – from faraway conquerors like Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, who menaced eleventh-century Kashmir with armoured elephants, to the many local incursions that broke out during the reign of King Ananta, whose court Somadeva served.

The tales of the *Ocean* swing all over India. In their sensuous landscapes, we experience the tropical richness of southern India, with its mango and sandalwood trees, and its rainy season, which is compared to a ‘fierce elephant’ with a ‘loud deep thunder-roar and long ketaka tusks, come down upon the forest of the heats’. Somadeva’s stories are too varied to be contained by a single region – they paint a picture of all of India, not only the region in which he set them down. In this respect, they are comparable with the tales of the Grimms, which reached beyond Hesse to represent the emerging German nation.

But Kashmir remains at the heart of the collection. As the scholar Krishna Mohan has written, ‘So deeply is the author immersed in his own atmosphere that even the God of Death (Yamaraja) is said to write on birch bark, in place of the palm leaf used in most parts of India.’ From lakes full of lotus leaves to cultural details recorded in medieval Kashmir, such as court dancing, chewing the betel leaf and wall paintings, Somadeva rendered the world he knew. Fantastical as his stories may be, like so many others on this trail, they evoke their teller’s experience.

Which points us to the key tension at the heart of the *Ocean.* Somadeva was trying to distract his queen, to spirit her away from the fractiousness of the Kashmiri court, but he couldn’t keep this world from seeping into his stories. The *Ocean* is a work of delirious escapism, where we see men visiting magical cities on the backs of talking birds and flying through the skies on mechanical chariots. But it was written by a poet who had a keen awareness of human foibles, which bubble to the surface of his stories. ‘Your reputation for vice,’ a king is chastised, ‘has shot up in the earth like a creeper.’ For Somadeva’s audience, sharp retorts like this wouldn’t have felt entirely fanciful.

Not that the poet was knocking his own patrons: when it came to the troubles of his time, the most obvious culprits were elsewhere. Queen Suryavati’s husband was ‘the blest Ananta’, who Somadeva hails as ‘an emperor whose footstool was made a touchstone for masses of rubies on

the crests of all lords of earth'. There's no point expecting warts-and-all accuracy from a medieval court poet. 'Now this moon of kings,' the poet records, 'wedded as his queen a daughter of the monarch of Trigarta,[FN3] Suryavati, who, like the juncture of dawn, dispelled darkness from her subjects and was universally adored.' Clearly he's not going to dish the dirt on his patrons (fortunately, the medieval Kashmiri chronicler Kalhana is much more helpful in this regard), but within his stories Somadeva acknowledges the elusiveness of human perfection. As a sage puts it early in the *Ocean*: 'The only thing that is stable in this ever-changeful world is instability.'

Even before King Ananta was crowned, Kashmir was in a crisis. His older brother, Hariraja, only ruled for twenty-two days before he was killed, allegedly by his own mother's witchcraft because he disapproved of her scandalous behaviour. She was planning, the chronicler Kalhana tells us, in his *Rajatarangini* (or *River of Kings*), to crown herself as ruler when the eight-year-old Ananta was enthroned by the nobles. He was barely out of his coronation bath when his paternal uncle marched an army on the capital. War would burn through his reign and Ananta would develop into 'a terror to his foes', who 'moved over the battlefield', in Kalhana's words, 'his body covered with mangled flesh and blood'. After one battle, his hand was jammed to his sword with gore and his attendants had to use a solution of 'milk-fomentation' to extricate the blade.

A decisive factor in Ananta's early victories was his minister Rudrapala, an exile from the Shahi kingdom of Kabul, who had been forced out of his homeland by the invasions of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. Rudrapala personally led the Kashmiri army against another invader, the Lord of Darad, and presented the enemy's head and crown to the king. But Rudrapala was a controversial figure, Kalhana tells us, 'the protector of the thieves and Chandalas[FN4] who plundered and killed men'. It was Rudrapala who arranged the king's marriage to Suryavati, while the minister himself married her older sister.

The royal union would prove enduring, if rocky. Suryavati established herself as the 'most beloved' of Ananta's wives and a formidable political operator. After a period of unrest and economic strife, in which Ananta had to mortgage his crown to a betel leaf merchant (chewing the betel leaf was one of the luxurious pastimes of the age, and betel is often given as a token of friendship by characters in the *Ocean*), the king's financial

struggle was resolved when he handed control of the treasury to Suryavati. ‘From this time the queen took up the administration of the country, and the king carried out the queen’s orders,’ Kalhana records. ‘The husband submitted to the wife, but everything was amicably managed owing to the sinless character of both.’ Suryavati was, by this account, a woman of considerable political skill. However, having saved Ananta from his ‘costly habits’, she overstepped her influence, in Kalhana’s view: ‘Gradually the simple king became henpecked, a circumstance which became the cause of his misfortunes.’ Keen that her son, Kalasha, be secure in his inheritance – a matter of concern for the wives of polygamous kings – Suryavati advised Ananta to abdicate in the young prince’s favour.

It was a disastrous move. Kalasha was a reckless youth with a terrible taste in friends. Among his entourage were a cat merchant doubling as a preacher, who claimed he could cure men by rubbing their heads with hands smeared in cat shit. ‘These men of no real merit hoodwinked the king and held him completely in their power,’ reported Kalhana; ‘the king too spent nights with them in music, drinking wine, and forcing women to their company.’

Kings surrounded by toadies and hypocrites – hardly a reinvention of the wheel. With the new king’s faction rising against the old, a *King Lear*-like scenario unfolded, and the queen was driven to despair. For Suryavati ‘repented’ of her advice, Kalhana tells us, but found herself powerless against the corruption of Kalasha’s court. So she and her husband were forced to leave the capital and make their way to the temple town of Vijayeshwara, near the holy cave of Amarnath where Shiva traditionally revealed the secret of creation to Parvati, which remains a significant Hindu pilgrimage site to this day.

Amongst the queen’s retinue was Somadeva. Whatever mood his queen was in, he was able to cater to her needs. Fancy a laugh about the hypocrisy of court life? How about the one about the king who tried to execute a Brahmin for talking to the queen, only to discover that half the ‘women’ in his harem were his many wives’ cross-dressing lovers? Or if you’re in a more reflective mood, why not try a moral parable about idealised femininity, in the form of Sita, wife of the divine hero Rama, and how she proved her chastity by floating over a forest lake? Or if you’d like a surreal fantasy adventure, how about the tale of King Naravahanadatta’s

journey to the city of wooden automata, where all the people and animals are made out of wood except for the carpenter-king who presides over them, who fled there on a flying chariot after his brother had ransacked a royal treasury with string-operated wooden swans?

When it came to distraction, Queen Suryavati had hit the jackpot. Pushed out of the capital and torn between her son and husband in a slow-moving civil war that would run through many twists, she needed more than the mere ‘moment’ of distraction the poet modestly suggests he provided. Like a modern-day TV addict bingeing on box sets, she needed as much ‘content’ as Somadeva could supply. So thank the stars he had so many stories at his fingertips. For, if ever a collection was designed to keep its target audience diverted, surely it was the meandering and multitudinous *The Ocean of the Streams of Story.*

The Tale of the Flying Avenger

The sun is boiling down on poor Lohajangha – a young Brahmin who's scrambled out of the city of Mathura after being set upon by a band of warriors enlisted by his lover's vindictive mother. So he seeks shade in the hide of a dead elephant. But when a storm erupts, the hide contracts and binds him inside, and he's dragged towards the sea by a flood.

Death by drowning looks like Lohajangha's fate – when the garuda, a divine being with eagle-like golden wings and a human torso, lifts the elephant's hide in its talons and carries this bundle over the sea. Crawling out of his pachydermic container in Sri Lanka, Lohajangha finds himself facing demonic tree-dwellers, the Rakshasas. Taken to their king, Lohajangha claims he had a vision in a dream, telling him to seek him out. It proves a profitable ruse: the king of the Rakshasas entertains him lavishly, loads him with jewels and gives him a magical bird for the ride home.

Returning to Mathura with his loot, Lohajangha decides to avenge himself. When he fell in love with the courtesan Rupinika, her pimp of a mother decided to get him out of the way by hiring warriors to beat him up. Now, Lohajangha disguises himself as the god Vishnu, arriving on his magical bird at Rupinika's house. Her mother, believing she has a shot at salvation after a lifetime of sin, begs to be admitted to paradise, and Lohajangha sees his chance for revenge. He tells the old pimp to shave her head, wear a necklace of skulls and paint one side of her body lamp-black and the other red. She does as instructed, and he carries her on the bird, leaving her on top of a pillar, and calling out to the people that the goddess of pestilence is about to fall upon them. At first alarmed, the people recognise the terrified pimp and the whole town erupts in laughter. When Lohajangha reveals his ruse, they present him with a turban of honour and free Rupinika so she can marry him. So the Brahmin and his wife, enriched by all the jewels he was given in Sri Lanka, live in comfort for the rest of their days, and never again does he have any trouble from his humiliated mother-in-law.

Chapter 17

Reborn Through Tales

A pious life will bring its own rewards, especially if you're a Brahmin. But you won't necessarily complete the religious tasks you've planned. Somadeva was writing for a patron well known for her piety, who 'set up a Shiva on the banks of the Vitasta', as the chronicler Kalhana tells us, 'and at the time of sanctifying the god and temple she removed the poverty of many Brahmins by bestowing on them cows, horses, gold and jewels'. The same religious patronage is praised by Somadeva himself: 'The Kashmiris were adorned with excellent monasteries built by this queen,' he tells us, 'which were like holy traditions, in being kept by hundreds of Brahmins born in many lands.'

As Suryavati's loyal servant, Somadeva fills his tales with figures and motifs from Hindu scriptures, and many storylines are built around the ritual life of pious Hindus (such as the tale of Lohajangha, who meets Rupinika in the temple where she performs as a *devadasi*, a temple dancer, and has his adventure to the demon-haunted Sri Lanka, evoking the ancient Sanskrit epic *The Ramayana*, after setting out on pilgrimage).

'We worship Shiva,' the poet declares, 'who, though free from the hue of passion, abounds in colours, the skilful painter who is ever producing new and wonderful creations.' The art of storytelling is bound up with the three-eyed god himself – whose storytelling to Parvati triggers the whole enterprise. It is when Parvati asks Shiva for a story, unknown to anybody else, that the narrative starts to unspool: for the story is overheard by an invisible attendant, who is punished for his eavesdropping with exile from the heavens. A friend who tries to defend him is also exiled – cursed to life on earth in mortal form – with the condition that only when they broadcast the stolen tale can they return to the heavens. It's a characteristic inversion: having stripped the tale of its privacy, now they must make it

public. And it carries a deeper meaning: storytelling has been brought from the heavens to the realm of mortals.

How different from Western culture, where folk tales and the dominant theology have rarely been on speaking terms. Angels and saints are *personae non gratae* in the *contes de fées* or the *fiabe* of Giambattista Basile. ‘Beauty and the Beast’, famously, doesn’t contain a single mention of God. The fairies who guide the European tales are outside of Christian theology (indeed, they evoke the pre-Christian beliefs the Church fought ruthlessly to suppress). They reflect the schism between religious institutions and the cult practices of ordinary people, a schism instinctively forestalled by Hinduism’s pluralism.

Part of this pluralism is to incorporate more strands than Hinduism alone. As the *Ocean*’s translator, Arshia Sattar, told me: ‘Hinduism is only one among many rivers in the *Ocean*, I think Buddhism is a really strong contrapuntal presence here and many of the stories originated or had currency in Buddhist and Jain trading cultures and communities.’ Among many examples, there is the tale of a king who offers his own flesh to a divine hawk rather than sacrificing the dove that has sought his protection, which echoes a story about the Buddha; and in the city of Takshasila, full of ‘splendid Buddhist temples’, Somadeva presents a wise Buddhist who defends his neglect of the Brahminic faith by insisting, ‘Religion is not confined to one form’.

This diversity offers a key insight into Somadeva. He was drawing on a wide range of texts, pluralistic rather than puritanical. But he was still narrating these tales at a Hindu-dominated court, for a queen whose Hindu piety was an important part of her official identity. The *Ocean* delves into the textures of Hindu ritual and learning, evoking the same practices that were performed by its core audience. Austerities are performed by pilgrims in the Himalayas, festivals are held in honour of Indra, burnt offerings are made to Saraswati and Shiva, widows throw themselves on their dead husbands’ funeral pyres, enacting the practice of suttee, verses are delivered in praise of the elephant god Ganesh and Krishna is invoked to ward off demons.

In one famous tale, a worshipper visits a temple to the goddess Durga and realises he has no offering to give. So he fastens his head to the chain of a bell and cuts it off with a sword. His brother-in-law, not wishing to appear any less devoted, decapitates himself as well. Distraught, the

latter's sister (and the former's wife) makes a noose to hang herself, but a holy voice advises her to put the heads back on the bodies. She does as commanded, but in her distress, she places the wrong heads on the wrong bodies, which leads to a moral conundrum over which of the revitalised men is now her husband.

These tales of devotion and ritual practice, lending themselves so easily to magical occurrences, remind us of how the folk tale processes the raw matter of religious ritual. Somadeva's stories celebrate magic in the form of witch rides, transformations and magic spells or *mantras* (a Sanskrit word that English has adopted to suggest a sacred utterance). There's a particular spiritual meaning to the transformations, aligning with ideas about reincarnation. Which is why so many stories revolve around characters turning into other people and creatures – a heavenly being becomes a mortal becomes a peacock becomes a rat. Somadeva's story collection – which articulates reincarnation through its storytelling structure, one story passing to another, one voice to another – captures the polyphony not only of storytelling but also of the many life cycles of a reincarnated soul.

This is reflected in the collection's origin tale, narrated in the early part of the *Ocean*, about Somadeva's predecessor as a teller of tales – the holy attendant, known on earth as Gunadhya, who is charged with making Shiva's tale public. He has several obstacles to overcome: 'that great poet', Somadeva tells us, 'wrote it with his own blood in the forest, not possessing ink'. But when he shows the book to the most powerful king in the world, his would-be patron isn't impressed. King Satavahana scorns the screed, declaring the language in which it is written (a lost and mysterious tongue known as Paishachi) 'is barbarous, and the letters are written in blood'. So Gunadhya retreats to the forest and burns the pages, reciting them out loud as he commits them to his pyre. Drawn to his performance, the animals of the forest gather around him, neglecting to graze, which leads to a rapid decline in the nutritional quality of meat, compelling the king to seek out the poet he rejected (along with many other things, this tale is a wish-fulfilment fantasy for every disgruntled writer in history). One book of stories remains out of seven, and King Satavahana broadcasts this to the world, thus freeing Gunadhya from his curse. In the process, Somadeva clarifies one of his themes: the redemptive power of storytelling. Whether Gunadhya inscribing his story

in his own blood, or a parrot that ‘knows all the sciences and the arts’ narrating his tale at a royal court, it is storytelling that commonly releases characters from their curses, enabling them to return to their preferred form of life.

This harmony between folk tales and religion is a marker of the *Ocean*’s difference from Western storytelling, where Church suppression pushed folk beliefs underground, when it didn’t absorb them. Reading the Indian tales, we experience the magic of a different kind of storytelling. At the same time, we are guided towards the spiritual depths that can still be found buried under the surfaces of our most familiar tales, if only we are prepared to look.[FN1]

The Sacredness of Sex

But for all its religious trappings, the *Ocean* is a remarkably worldly collection. In Arshia Sattar’s words, ‘this text is concerned with only one thing – worldly pleasure and power’. The gods may be worshipped, but it is the minor deities, the *yakshis* and *yoginis* and especially the sky-roaming vidyadharas, who involve themselves with human affairs. As for the heroes, all the castes are here, and unlike in the epics, there is plenty of mobility between them: members of lower castes marry the high-born, Brahmins become bandits, merchants are crowned as kings, and the most ostentatiously pious characters are usually comic foils rather than heroes. As Somadeva declares, ‘People who fill their heads with *Vedas* have no room in them for anything else!’

And in the *Ocean*, ‘anything else’ means one thing above all . . .

Throughout the *Ocean*, people are *at it*: climbing into one another’s bedrooms, arranging assignations when they’re bathing in temple lakes, invoking the *gandharva* marriage code (a shotgun wedding system that enables them to zip through the formalities without witnesses and – most importantly – without wasting any time). This reflects a striking difference in terms of how medieval Indian and European society depicted themselves, which only feels implausible if you’ve never read the *Kama Sutra* or visited the temples of Khajuraho.

There, in the state of Madhya Pradesh, under the prickly canopies of dozens of crocketed spires, you can see some of the supernatural beings

that illuminate the pages of the *Ocean*, such as sky-roaming vidyadharas and the wing-stretching *garuda.* Magic and myth ripple across the sand-coloured stonework, where three-eyed Shiva lifts his trident and Ganesh's trunk curls around his belly, but what really pops the visitor's eyeballs out of their sockets is the sex.

'Breasts like clusters of mandaras' (so Somadeva describes a lover of the roaming King Naravahanadatta), 'face like a full-blown lotus'. Female beauty surges through the *Ocean*, where the god Indra declares, 'A lovely one will sweep away with the sea of her beauty, flowing between the lofty banks of her breasts, even one who can restrain his passions.' Somadeva's descriptions, liberally strewn on the princesses and immortal beauties who lean over balconies, bathe in lotus lakes and catch their lovers' eyes in the doorways of temples, could equally apply to the women carved on the ledges of Khajuraho, bulging between sandstone pillars, picking thorns out of their feet, unknotting their girdles, looking in mirrors, scratching their backs, holding parrots, taking part in group dances, making love.

One Lothario (or perhaps we should call him a Naravahanadatta!) hangs upside down, hands reaching between the legs of two busty women either side of another lover pinned to his waist. Near this tantric foursome, another woman is pressed so tight to her lover that you can see his ball sack under her left buttock, while another woman rests a hand on her leg. A woman bends over while a man takes her from behind, her bowed head nearly touching the hair of a woman whose breasts are crushed against the knees of a man whose penis flutes between her lips, her arm around his buttocks, which nudge a woman draping an arm around the neck of a bearded man who's tweaking her breast. To look upon these scenes is to be reminded of the randy Indra in the *Ocean*, cursed to have a thousand vaginas all over his body, which turn into a thousand eyes.

Of twenty-five surviving temples at Khajuraho, the largest and most impressive is the Kandariya Mahadeva, which is dedicated to Shiva. Its *shikara* spire, bristling with finials and reaching thirty-one metres above the temple's granite base, suggests Mount Kailasa where the god cavorts with his lovers. Deep inside its interconnected chambers, in the dark inner sanctum, worshippers hang garlands of flowers around the marble lingam representing the god's creative force. The carnival of eroticism sweeps between the cornices outside, hundreds of figures stretching arms and legs and sometimes rock-hard penises (literally – they are carved out of rock)

under the eighty-four spires of the temple, the tips of their bodies glistening in the sunlight. But inside, the sculpture is pushed aside for the minimalist simplicity of devotion; the bulging body parts are left behind and all that remains is a single marble phallus.

The temples have been fascinating Western visitors for the best part of two centuries. After hacking through the jungle in 1838, Captain T. S. Burt of the Royal Bengal Engineers reported to the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* that 'the sculptor had at times allowed his subject to grow rather warmer than there was any absolute necessity for his doing'. To Burt and his fellow buttoned-up Victorian peepers, the sculptures were 'extremely indecent and offensive'. But in order to understand them, we need to peel away the same Western gaze that can obscure the *Ocean.* The temples were built in the second quarter of the eleventh century, so they are nearly contemporary with the *Ocean*. As works of eleventh-century Saivite Hindu devotion, they help to illuminate Somadeva's milieu and vice versa.

Sex is an act both human and divine. The erotic scenes of Khajuraho are depicting the moment of transcendence, when men and women become embodiments of Shiva and Shakti, consumed within the cosmic energy out of which the universe was created. Shiva tells the first tale of the *Ocean* when his consort is sitting on his lap; the heroes who fill the subsequent stories are on a panoramic hunt for lovers, from King Naravahanadatta roaming the skies in search of another hotty to add to his harem, to Saktideva the ex-gambler, whose search for the 'Golden City' is sparked by a riddling princess 'who seemed to have been formed by the Creator to dash Lakshmi's pride in her beauty'. Temples like those at Khajuraho provide them with clandestine meeting places: a beautiful heroine called Manovati, for example, riding a lion to a Shiva temple and meeting her future husband there. Sex, like storytelling, has divine sanction.

In Western tales, sex is a barrier dividing magical tales for adults from those we tell to children (although, when we dig into some of the earlier versions of our fairy tales, we find plenty of overlap – whether in Rapunzel's pregnancy, shaded out of later editions of the *Children's and Household Tales*, or the Beast's request of Belle, 'Would you like to sleep with me?' watered down by later redactors into 'Will you marry me?'). But the *Ocean* is less easily segregated across pedagogical boundaries. It's one of the reasons that tales from the *Ocean* don't regularly appear in children's anthologies. But it's also a part of the collection's freshness. In

the fertile scope of the *Ocean*, where one tale spurts out of another, splits itself into another pair of tales, each of which spins back to embrace the earlier tale, there is the ever-ripening fecundity of Hindu erotic sculpture.

But sex, in Somadeva's collection, also has a dark side. Hence the tale of the witch Kalaratri, who accuses the handsome Sundaraka of attempting to rape her, which leads to him being beaten up by her husband, seeking shelter in a cow-house and being lifted into the skies when Kalaratri and her coven turn up in the cow-house to perform their spells. Lust, Somadeva reminds us, can inspire terrible deeds, and this was a lesson worth preaching when the crown of Kashmir was worn by a sex addict. 'A prince distracted by unholy passion,' as the poet wrote, 'makes no distinction between what is lawful and what is illicit.'

The Bonfire of Suryavati

Having the wrong advisers didn't help. Among King Kalasha's coterie was a guru who, the chronicler Kalhana tells us, 'was indiscriminate in his intercourse with his own daughter'. In a court like Kalasha's, this was hardly career-damaging. 'Always knocking about from house to house to steal the embraces of other men's wives', Kalasha 'felt no pleasure in the embraces of his own wives at night'. Men who are at the mercy of their sexual appetites aren't usually known for their brilliant leadership qualities, and Kalasha's father was growing restless over his son's behaviour. It was up to Queen Suryavati to broker the peace.

But Kalasha was too neurotic for a truce. A brief period of calm flared into open conflict when he set fire to Ananta's infantry, used poison and other artifices to undermine the old king's defences, and spread malicious rumours to damage his parents' credibility. He even accused his own mother of being a prostitute. Standing on the terrace of his palace, he watched his father's property burn on his orders, dancing with joy like a Kashmiri version of the Roman emperor Nero. The conflagration swallowed up most of King Ananta's wealth, and huts had to be built on the riverbanks to house the royal entourage. Maddened by the destruction, the old king turned on his queen in a fatal confrontation.

'Have I not lost glory, fame, heroism, kingdom, spirit, sense and wealth by being subjected to the influence of a wife?' Ananta declared. He was so

enraged he even questioned whether Kalasha was his natural son, suggesting there may have been truth in the rumour that the royal baby had died and, in order to protect her status as mother of the heir, Suryavati had secretly installed a lower-born infant. But the queen wasn't putting up with this kind of slander. 'You have abused me as an unchaste woman of your family,' she retorted. 'Useless and old, driven by your son, as you are, I fear lest people would say that your wife too has forsaken you.'

So lacerating were Suryavati's words that blood was seen to ooze from the king's seat – he'd stabbed himself with his sword. 'Relieved of the tyranny of his wife and son,' Kalhana tells us, 'the good king stretched his legs to sleep his long sleep.'

Her riposte may have provoked his suicide, but Suryavati was devoted to Ananta. At the funeral, she proceeded on a chariot, accompanying her husband while the music played. The carriage bearing Ananta's body was decorated with banners and 'so bright that it reflected the figures of men who stood round and the hair of the [subject] kings which waved in the air'. Suryavati took ritual water to curse her son's advisers and made an oath of her innocence against all the accusations that had dogged her. 'And thus having established her fame she suddenly jumped from her little carriage into the burning fire. And the flames rose and reddened the sky and appeared to the people as if it were painted in a picture.'

Suttee was, by the cultural mores of the time, the honourable way for a queen to go. It's the much admired fate of several characters in the *Ocean*, such as the virtuous Queen Dharmavati, who 'leapt into that burning pyre, with its hair of flame, as gladly as into a cool lake'. After Suryavati had emulated those tales narrated by her court poet, her ashes were carried, along with her husband's, to be scattered in the Ganges. Their son Kalasha mellowed as the years passed, developing into a wiser ruler, until he was succeeded by his own son Harsha. However, in the combative atmosphere of medieval Kashmir, Harsha would die violently as well, slain in a rebellion by his own lords. A reminder that, in a valley proud of its impermeability, the demons are often within.

As for what happened to the queen's teller of tales, that's harder to answer. No less a scholar than Sir Aurel Stein (explorer of Asia and translator of Kalhana's *River of Kings*) asked around in the 1880s, and though he made extensive notes of Kashmir's ancient sites, he found no information about Somadeva. We can only speculate about the poet's fate,

for with the grace of an instinctive storyteller, he left behind nothing other than his tales.

The Tale of the Zombie Who Liked Riddles

For ten years, a mendicant brings fruit to the court of King Trivikramasena. But when a monkey bursts open one of the fruits, a jewel is revealed. Summoned to explain the more than three thousand jewels he's presented, the mendicant tells the king he needs a hero to help him perform a special incantation. So the king accepts his request: to pull down a corpse from a rosewood tree and transport it to a cemetery in the dead of night.

But when Trivikramasena reaches the tree and throws the corpse over his shoulder, he discovers it is possessed by a *vetaal* – a zombie-like creature that can animate the dead. This vetaal also happens to be an inveterate teller of stories, each of which ends in a riddle. If the king fails to answer the riddle truthfully, the vetaal will split his head into a hundred pieces.

Amongst the tales narrated by the vetaal, there's the one about the woman whose husband and brother cut off their heads in a temple and she puts the wrong heads back on the wrong bodies (so who is now her husband?); another about a princess who loses her heart to a condemned thief and throws herself onto his pyre, where he is raised from the dead by Shiva (and why did the thief weep and laugh at the stake?); and another about a man given a magic pill so he can turn into a woman and steal inside the chambers of a princess he rescued from a rampaging elephant (but, given the trickery he has played, is he her rightful husband?).

Each tale ends in a riddle, and at each correct answer, the vetaal disappears. Obliged to retrieve the corpse, the king piggybacks his storytelling cargo through a cycle of twenty-four stories, until the vetaal tells of a king and his son who find an exiled queen and her daughter in a forest. Owing to a mistake about the size of their feet, the king marries the princess and the prince marries the queen. What, asks the vetaal, is the relationship of their children? The king is stumped, and so the vetaal brings the cycle of stories to an end, impressed by his dedication and

courage. It leaves the corpse for him to carry to the mendicant, but warns him to be wary of the mendicant's scheme.

In the cemetery, amongst the shrieking and howling of jackals and vultures, the king lays down the corpse, and the mendicant asks him to prostrate himself. But the king insists the mendicant must show how this is done. After all, he's a king, how could he possibly know how to bow before others? This gives him his chance, and following the vetaal's advice, he decapitates the prostrating mendicant. So King Trivikramasena is granted kingship over the sky-roaming vidyadharas after his earthly existence, and his single wish is granted: that 'these first twenty-four questions and answers, charming with their various tales, and this conclusion, the twenty-fifth of the series, be all famous and honoured on the earth'.

Chapter 18

East Meets West

A search for a magical city after a princess's riddle, an otherworldly realm where the inhabitants never age or die, men turned into savage beasts, shape-shifting magicians doing battle in the form of different animals: again and again, the *Ocean* laps at the stories we've already met. In most cases, the correspondences are faint, like barely audible rumours whispered between the regions. We detect a strand of a story, a discrete motif, but the versions veer off in different directions. When the hermit's daughter Kadaligarbha sows mustard seeds on her way through the forest, for example, we're reminded of Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumb trail, but Kadaligarbha is leaving the forest, not trapped in it, sowing the seeds so she can find her way back to her father's hermitage when the king discards her (curiously, in a grisly plot development of false witchcraft accusations that echoes another of Dortchen Wild's tales, 'The Six Swans').

Faint as some of these whispers may be, there are others that speak with remarkable clarity. The volume rises and we can almost hear the synching of the tellers' voices. Each of the storytellers visited on this trail was narrating stories that featured, in some substantial form, in the *Ocean.* Take Giambattista Basile's 'Five Sons': it repeats the *Ocean*'s 'Three Suitors', about a group of men who save a beautiful woman from the clutches of a monster (a demonic *rakshasa* for Somadeva, an ogre for Giambattista). One locates the monster, another transports them to it, another slays it; and all debate who should claim the rescued captive (obviously, neither story alights on the solution of consulting the woman herself). Hanna Dyab told several stories that appear in strikingly close variations in the *Ocean*, such as 'The City of Gold' and a tale about a man who finds himself married to a flesh-eating sorceress, who is turned into a dog but avenges himself by turning her into a mare and regularly beating her. Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve's tales of men cursed into the form

of beasts are anticipated by Somadeva's many transformations, such as the lion ridden by the beautiful Manovati, whose curse is lifted at a wedding; and the Baroness d'Aulnoy's female-ruled 'Isle of Happiness' offers a timeless paradise comparable to the one depicted in the underwater adventure of Sattvasila, who leaps from a shipwreck to find himself in a kingdom free from age and death, with a beautiful immortal as its queen. There are several overlaps with the Grimms' *Children's and Household Tales*, of which one of the most intricate is the tale 'Doctor Know-All', about a charlatan who keeps striking lucky until he's asked to guess the creature under a covered dish and chastises himself with an old nickname ('poor Crab!'), which proves as lucky as the Indian version, whose nickname was 'Frog'. As for Ivan Khudiakov: of several correspondences, one of the most striking is that between his story 'Ivan Expensive' and Somadeva's battling *yoginis*; in both tales, the power to transform into beasts is used for profit in the marketplace before the duelling sorcerers try to outdo each other with their zoomorphic abilities.

As Wilhelm Grimm wrote in 1811, 'we may dare to follow the threads spun by old fables, and borne through the world in marvellous shapes and circuits'. There are dozens of other pathways between the *Ocean* and the stories found in Western and Middle Eastern culture. Many of the animal fables (which form a major portion of the *Ocean*) reappeared in the fables of La Fontaine in seventeenth-century France, after he'd read a Persian adaptation known as the *Fables of Bidpai*; while several tales of lusty suitors in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* correspond with the *Ocean.* The story of the virtuous and beautiful Upakosa, for example, about a young woman left to fend for herself, who tricks a string of high-ranking sex pests into a trunk and then exposes them to the king, smeared humiliatingly in lamp-black, recurs in the Arabic tale 'The Lady and Her Five Suitors' (in which the harassers, locked into a cabinet, lose control of their bladders and end up peeing all over each other) and in the eighth day of the *Decameron*, as well as in numerous other collections, from Straparola's *Facetious Nights* to the Norse tale of 'Mastermaid'; while the plot of Chaucer's 'Franklin's Tale' echoes one of the king-riding vetaal's tales, about a merchant's daughter who repels the sexual predation of her brother's friend and a thief by making appointments to meet them later, a tale reimagined by Boccaccio in the tenth day of the *Decameron*, which is probably how Chaucer found it.

It reflects the universality of the themes in Somadeva's tales that many of them have reappeared in so many different locales. But it also reflects the patterns of movement between human societies. Boccaccio's tales are narrated by high-born refugees from the Black Death, and there's something appropriate about this, given that many of the Florentine's tales followed pathways similar to the trajectories of disease. Like the *Yersinia pestis* bacteria, carried by rodents, transmitted by fleas, spreading along trade routes between Central Asia and Europe, so travelled the folk tales. Whether for tales or ticks, caravanserais and other wayfarers' inns were super-spreaders. Which explains why a tale like the one about Upakosa found its way to trading centres like Isfahan in Persia, Egypt and the thriving city-states of Italy, before winding its way north to Holland, England and eventually Iceland.[FN1]

There's a pattern here, in which the broader storytelling of the *Ocean* participates; intersecting more frequently, and in closer detail, with *The Thousand and One Nights* than it does with the Grimms' tales, and more with Giambattista Basile's tales than with the Grimms'. Stories flowed along the routes of caravans and ships, burrowing into their new host societies, adapting to local conditions, reshaped by new storytellers who added their own spin on them and made them their own (see Figure 2).

Although it's the aim of this book to draw attention to individual fairy tellers, there's a contraflow in the wider narrative of story distribution. Like the adventuring King Naravahanadatta, famous for his many wives, fantastical tales are too promiscuous to stick with a single partner. They keep moving around, testing themselves in new locales, mixing with different story strands to create hybrid versions that free themselves from their predecessors, washing themselves clean of individual authors' print marks.

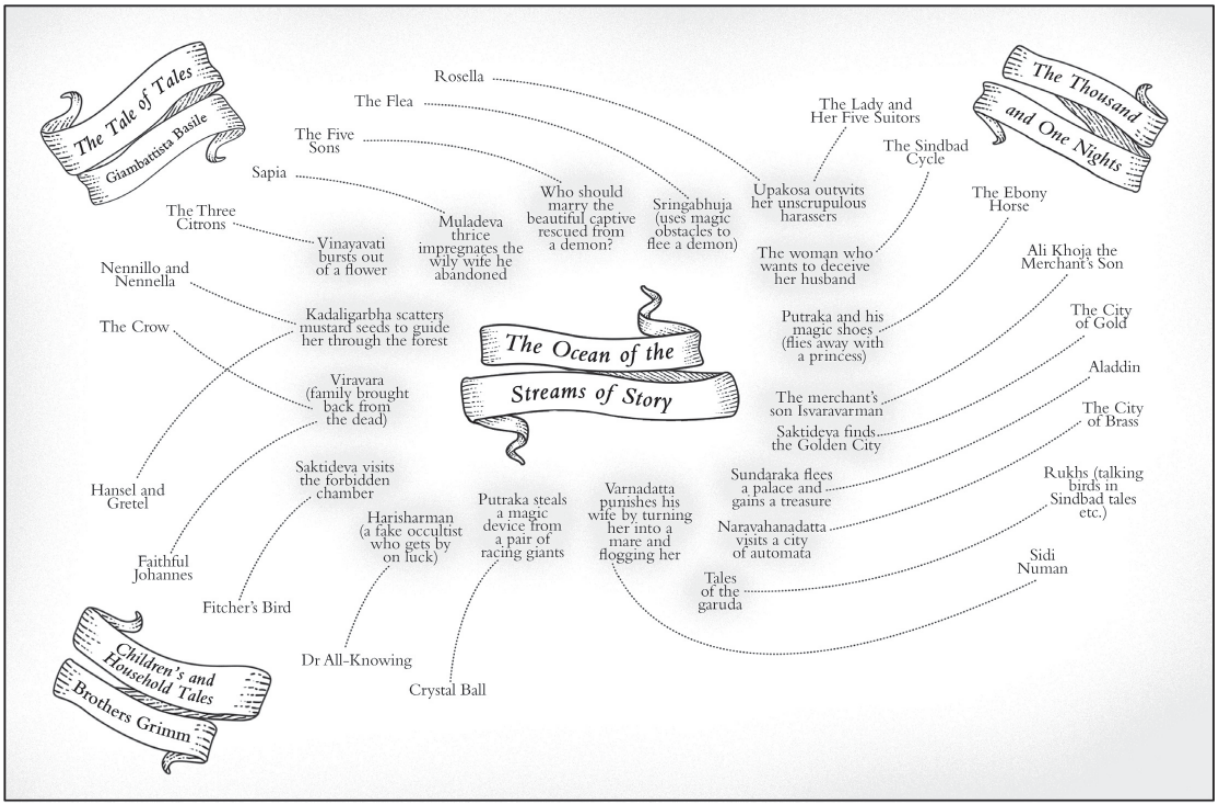

The Tale of Tales
Giambattista Basile
The Thousand and One Nights
The Ocean of the Streams of Story
Children's and Household Tales
Brothers Grimm
Rosella
The Flea
The Five Sons
Sapia
The Three Citrons
Nennillo and Nennella
The Crow
Hansel and Gretel
Faithful Johannes
Fitcher's Bird
Dr All-Knowing
Crystal Ball
Vinayavati bursts out of a flower
Muladeva thrice impregnates the wily wife he abandoned
Who should marry the beautiful captive rescued from a demon?
Sringabhuja (uses magic obstacles to flee a demon)
Upakosa outwits her unscrupulous harassers
The Lady and Her Five Suitors
The Sindbad Cycle
The Ebony Horse
Ali Khoja the Merchant's Son
The City of Gold
Aladdin
The City of Brass
Rukhs (talking birds in Sindbad tales etc.)
Sidi Numan
Kadaligarbha scatters mustard seeds to guide her through the forest
Viravara (family brought back from the dead)
Saktideva visits the forbidden chamber
Harisharman (a fake occultist who gets by on luck)
Putraka steals a magic device from a pair of racing giants
Varnadatta punishes his wife by turning her into a mare and flogging her
Putraka and his magic shoes (flies away with a princess)
The merchant's son Isvaravarman
Saktideva finds the Golden City
Sundaraka flees a palace and gains a treasure
Naravahanadatta visits a city of automata
Tales of the garuda
The woman who wants to deceive her husband

Figure 2: A few connections between The Ocean of the Streams of Story *and other collections.*

But sometimes the print marks are ineffaceable. Certain stories that we have already encountered, such as ‘Beauty and the Beast’ or ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves’, are indelibly tattooed with the patterns of the narrators who did so much to fashion them. In Somadeva’s case, however, these signatures are harder to glean. He left behind fewer clues of his storytelling process than any of our other fairy tellers. There are no memoirs, no diaries, no letters, not even other works to compare with his story collection.

On the other hand, he left behind more than any of the other tellers. Because he left behind his tales: three hundred and fifty of them, approximately, which is more than Giambattista Basile, Hanna Dyab, Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, Dortchen Wild and Hans Christian Andersen combined. It is in this sense that we can glimpse Somadeva: a man who admired self-control and abhorred its loss, had little patience for the ostentatiously pious, saw hypocrisy everywhere, hiding in plain sight, and was a stickler for linguistic correctness.[FN2] There’s a sly fastidiousness to this poet. I don’t imagine he suffered fools gladly, although he took great delight in mocking them in his tales. Along with a sharp but

generous sense of humour, he had a love for storytelling so richly diverse it's tempting to imagine him as a born raconteur who could never turn off the tap. His philosophy was pluralistic, absorbing stories from many different traditions, retelling them in his own voice. Not only do these stories depict marriage across the caste system, they celebrate the wisdom of nobles who listen to the ordinary people. In one of the riddling vetaal's tales, the prince's friend is able to translate the signs of the prince's beloved, 'because I keep in touch with the common people', and the lesson is repeated at the end of the same tale, when the vetaal pins the blame on the king, for failing to uncover 'what the common people are saying'. In his own subtle way, Somadeva was offering his patrons lessons that, on political as well as moral grounds, they would have done well to heed.

'The stories are travelling,' says the writer Gayathri Prabhu, 'and in travelling stories change. It feels like an ocean because it feels boundless. I do think Somadeva is somebody who deeply loved a good story.' This, above all else, is the Somadeva we can pin down: graceful in his art but garrulous in his storytelling and the multiple personas he was able to adopt. A man who took stories that others had narrated before him, and spun them through his own keen-eyed, sharp-witted filter. A man who crumbled his life into his tales so that, in the end, that's what he became: a man made out of story.

The *Ocean* may begin with a story narrated by Shiva and the adventures of his divine attendants, but in the final book we are listening to stories from a gambler, a hermit in the forest, an impoverished Brahmin who accidentally married a flesh-eating demon, a youthful seller of bedsteads. Slyly, Somadeva pulls his queen down from the lofty goings-on of the heavens to the grubbier antics on earth, and shows her the many voices of the people around her. Because everybody can tell a story, the *Ocean* insists, and everybody can listen to one. Stories take us away from the muck of mortal existence – literally, in the case of Gunadhya, and the many other characters who use their stories to release themselves from their curses; just as Somadeva's storytelling was intended to lift Queen Suryavati away from the anxieties of King Kalasha's chaotic reign; and some form of this salvation is pledged for all the collection's readers. 'Whoever reads this tale that issued from my mouth,' declares Shiva, in Somadeva's verses, 'and whoever listens to it with attention, and whoever

possesses it, shall soon be released from sins, and triumphantly attain the condition of a splendid vidyadhara, and enter my everlasting world.'

Listen to the stories and you'll roam the skies as an immortal. We do this whenever we hear them, carried into the Hindu mythosphere by Somadeva's narrative, but of course he's talking about something else. Through the physical act of listening and reading, we gain the grace of *moksha*, salvation. Storytelling won't just allow us to imagine the paradise of the immortals – it will take us there.

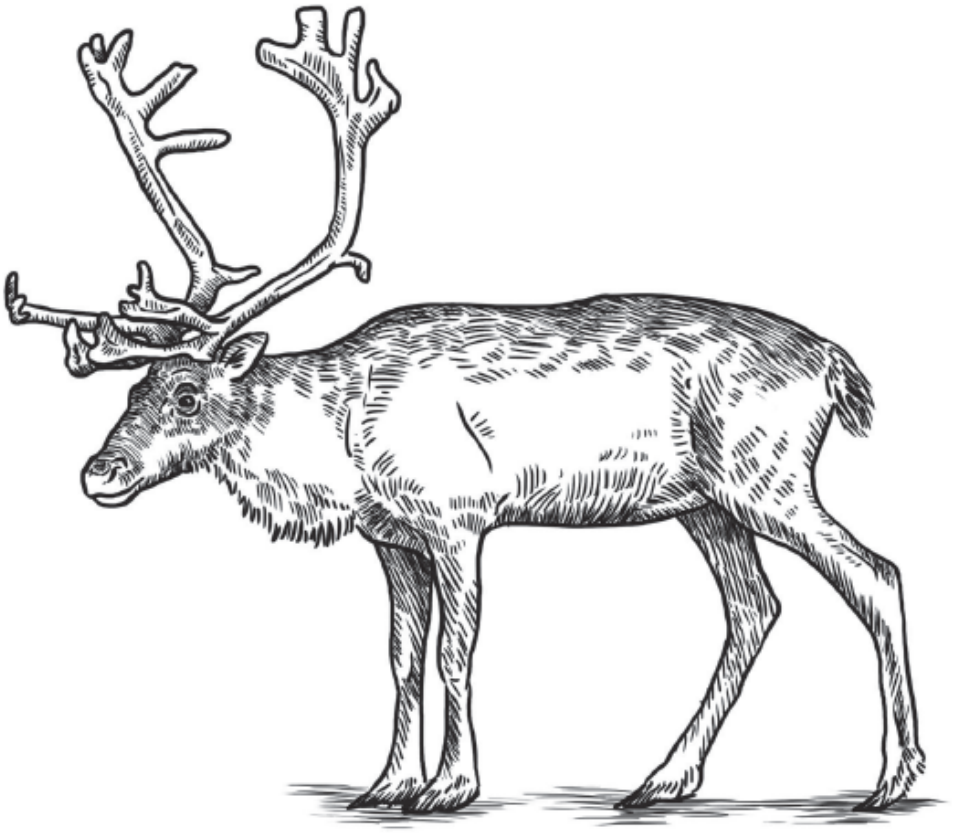
This redemptive power of storytelling brings us back to Giambattista Basile – to Princess Zoza using storytelling to reclaim her rightful husband in the frame tale of *The Tale of Tales*, the story with which this book began – and it carries us right to the other end of the world, away from the banyan and sandalwood trees of India to the frosty towns of Scandinavia, to meet our final fairy teller. A man whose life embodies the redemptive, healing power of storytelling. A man whose stories enabled him to climb out of the gutter and reach for the stars.

PART SEVEN

A Heart Too Warm for Ice

Johannes thought about all the beautiful things he would see in the big marvellous world as he walked on, farther and farther away from all that he knew. Soon he no longer recognised the countryside. He passed through villages and towns he had never seen before and all the people he met were strangers.

‘The Travelling Companion’ by Hans Christian Andersen (1836)



The Tale of the Tin Soldier

On his birthday, a boy opens a box of tin soldiers and sets them on the table. All are alike except for one, which is missing a leg. It was the last soldier to be cast and there wasn't enough tin. But it stands just as steadfast as the others.

Lying behind a snuffbox, the soldier can see a one-legged ballerina, who is stationed in the doorway of a pasteboard castle. She never seems to notice him, but he feels a connection with her. At night, while the other toys are prancing about, somersaulting and drawing on the blackboard, the soldier stays still, gazing at his one true love. But the next day he falls off the windowsill into the street. A couple of urchins set him in a boat made out of newspaper and sail him into a gutter, where a rat demands his passport and chases after him. The gutter empties into a canal and he's swallowed by a fish. Darkness encloses him until it's shattered by light. He's looking at the brightness of a kitchen and his captor is about to be cooked. Once he's cleaned up, a maid sets the tin soldier down among the toys in the living room – he's back in the same room he left this morning!

The best thing about his return is the sight of the ballerina, still posed in front of the castle. But his happiness is short-lived – a mischievous boy tosses him into the stove. It feels very hot all of a sudden. Whether this is caused by his love for the ballerina, or the fire in the stove, he can't decide, but he's aware that the colours of his uniform are melting with alarming speed. Then something extraordinary happens: a breeze catches the ballerina, she flies into the stove and they are united in one blistering moment of white-hot unity.

In the morning, the maid empties out the stove, and among the ashes she finds a little tin heart and the metal spangle from the ballerina's dress.

Chapter 19

Hans Christian Andersen

He’s been shadowing us all the way: experiencing the volcano that killed Giambattista Basile, inspired by Hanna Dyab’s tale of ‘Aladdin’, even knocking on the door of the Grimms’ house in Berlin. If there’s one name that’s welded to the concept of fairy tales, it’s surely that of Hans Christian Andersen. This isn’t just a Western conceit – he’s a cult figure in China, where he has his own special name, Antushun, and in his own lifetime he was gratified by the warm reception of his tales in India.

‘The poor washerwoman’s son who ran about with wooden shoes on his feet in the streets of Odense,’ wrote the thirty-two-year-old Hans in 1837, ‘has got so far that he is now treated like a son in the houses of some of Denmark’s most highly respected men and has friends among worthy and brilliant people.’ He had further to climb than any other fairy teller, and he rose much higher. With 156 fairy tales, published across a span of four decades, he was prolific as well as popular. Swept around the royal courts of Europe, he befriended the Swedish opera star Johanna ‘Jenny’ Lind, stayed at Charles Dickens’s house in Ramsgate, joined Alexandre Dumas on backstage tours of the Parisian theatre, enjoyed the hospitality of the King of Bavaria, the Grand Duke of Weimar, the Queen of Saxony. In the last year of his life, he was still receiving plaudits and was deluged by a ‘constant stream of letters’, as he put it, ‘asking for autographs’. No wonder he called himself ‘a child of good fortune’.

With new editions, multimedia museums, statues of Hans and performances of his tales spanning the globe, he’s the most bankable fairy teller of all. Which puts him on the front line for a backlash, chided for his ‘sentimental religiosity’, to quote one recent critic, his stories declared by another ‘too pious, too complicated and often too sad as well’. In his home town of Odense, some locals are so fed up with the hoopla around him

they talk about ‘Hans Christian Andersen Sickness’, a condition that was exacerbated by municipal failings over his bicentennial in 2005.[FN1]

‘To think that I,’ he wrote in a characteristic diary entry in 1856 (when he was a bestselling author in his fifties), ‘the poor child, son of a shoemaker and a washerwoman, have been kissed by the nephew of the emperor of Russia!’ His memoirs and diaries are rife with similarly cloying examples of false modesty. As for his stories: however admirable the rise of this ‘poor child’ may have been, many of his narrative choices haven’t aged well, especially from a feminist perspective. Which may explain why his stories are so frequently altered, from the happy ending ratcheted to Disney’s smash-hit take on ‘The Little Mermaid’ (1989) to Pixar’s feminist (but also aristocratised) reimagining of ‘The Snow Queen’ as *Frozen* (2013). Long considered the quintessential fairy teller, celebrated in his own lifetime as the only writer who had ‘succeeded in recovering, and reproducing’, in the words of the *English Daily News* (1875), ‘the spirit of imagination which constructed the old world fairy tales’, Hans Christian Andersen has become, for many, a hard figure to love. Which is why it’s worth taking a closer look.

Surely there is no more astonishing human possession than the imagination. Inventors of tales like Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, as well as interpreters of tales like Giambattista Basile, were endowed with extraordinary powers of imagination. But Hans surpassed them all. He shows us how the imagination feeds on life and nourishes it in return. ‘The history of my life,’ as he wrote, ‘will be the best commentary on my work.’ Because he left behind so much material (autobiographies, novels, diaries, letters, some of which have only become available in recent years, including an early story discovered in 2012), we are able to probe his life and tales more vividly than with any other fairy teller. In the process, we can explore why Hans Christian Andersen, for all his success, never escaped the feeling that he was an eternal outsider, never able to scrub out the stain of his birth, nor the deeper psychological issues that tormented him. Like the one-legged hero in ‘The Steadfast Tin Soldier’, there was something about him that could never be fixed.

The Boy Who Had to Leave

‘My life is a wondrous fairy tale,’ wrote Hans in his autobiographical *The Fairy Tale of My Life* (published 1855), ‘so eventful has it been, and wondrous happy’. *Eventyr* in Danish: an ‘adventure’, a marvellous against-the-odds odyssey. But Hans was writing with an eye on his own growing cult. An *eventyr* his life may have been, but his tales don’t always end happily: the Steadfast Tin Soldier melts in the stove; in ‘The Ice Maiden’, Rudy takes a fatal plunge; Little Ida’s flowers die; the Little Match Girl is frozen to death. Hans wasn’t somebody who believed that fairy tales have to ribbon themselves in a happily-ever-after.

On the island of Funen, in the heart of old Odense, on a cobbled street, is the house where Hans was born, on 2 April 1805. Today, Hans Jensen Stræde is a pastel-painted homage to Danish gentrification, with kitsch woollen elves in the windows and Christmas wreaths hanging over the doors (I was wandering through Denmark in the festive season). But scrub away the softening tones of two centuries of prosperity and you’re looking at a slum. Between the spinning-wheel and the table laden with shoemaking gear – wooden lasts, hammers, curling strips of leather – you can twirl around the low-ceilinged rooms Hans’s family shared with a couple of others. But you need to imagine the mud and disease, the smoke in your eyes from the copper-piped wood-burning stove, the screams of malnourished babies.

‘The home where I spent my childhood,’ he wrote, ‘was one single little room where almost all the space was taken up by the workshop, the bed and the settle on which I slept.’ That house is on the other side of town, over the river and behind the red-brick St Canute’s Cathedral. Hans was two years old when his parents moved there, and it remained his home until he left Odense at the age of fourteen. Black timber criss-crosses the yellow walls under overlapping moss-clad tiles, and inside a stove pipe snakes behind a wooden bed while a cobbler’s tools are scattered across a table in the same room. This was the laboratory for little Hans’s imagination, where he tucked himself into a corner, decorating his puppets and play theatre. ‘I very seldom played with other boys,’ he recalled, ‘even at school I took little interest in their games, but remained sitting within doors. At home I had playthings enough, which my father made me . . . I was a singularly dreamy child, and so constantly went about with my eyes shut, as at last to give the impression of having weak sight.’

Dreaminess may have saved this socially awkward child from his tawdry circumstances, but it didn't inoculate him. Unlike the Brothers Grimm, Hans rarely romanticised the home. Adventure lies in *den vide verden*, the wide world, but danger has a knack for sneaking inside, whether it's Thumbelina snatched through a pane of broken glass by a big ugly toad, or the villainous 'Shadow' stepping inside a philosopher's apartment to take over his life. Of all the tales that show the precariousness of the home, the bleakest is surely 'The Little Match Girl', in which the poor child daren't return home, for fear of being beaten by her father.

It took resilience and imagination to overturn these unpromising circumstances. This was a boy whose grandfather had been locked up for his mental instability, and who was jeered by local children (once, little Hans was so embarrassed, he hid behind a flight of stairs when he heard the boys shouting after 'Mad Anders'), while his grandmother had been incarcerated in the town jail for bearing three children out of wedlock; whose aunt ran a brothel; and whose father would be consigned to a pauper's grave. After his father's death in 1816, Hans had to work in a cloth mill and a tobacco factory. But unlike his occasional friend Charles Dickens, who used his difficult early experiences as the pig-iron out of which he hammered his early fiction, Hans flew off in the other direction, summoning feasts for elves and flowers, underwater mermaid kingdoms and storytelling contests between samovars and pots. The same childhood instinct that pushed him away from rough street games to his own cosy interior world would drive him in the making of his tales.

This wasn't a matter of simple escapism. 'On the north of the river,' as Odense resident and Andersen expert Ejnar Stig Askgaard puts it, 'you have churches, but there are dark forces on the other side. So Andersen was afraid of going outside to get milk and relieved when he crossed the river, because spirits cannot cross water. In the river there was a mer-man who claimed somebody every year.' This was a world where old beliefs and old ways of storytelling still flourished.

For a child fascinated by stories, Hans's trips to the Poor Law Institution with his grandmother were especially fruitful. Although his experiences there could sometimes be scary (he vividly remembered a half-naked madwoman lunging at him from her cell), he enjoyed the company of the women in the spinning room and entertained them with his

school lessons. ‘I talked about the heart and the kidneys,’ he recalled, ‘and everything I said made a deep impression on the assembly. I was thought to be a remarkably clever child, and they rewarded my chatter by telling me fairy tales, a world as rich as that in the Arabian Nights was revealed to me.’

But the figure who exerted the most influence was his father. He was ‘very fond of reading’, as Hans recalled, and narrated tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*, as well as helping him make his puppet theatre and toys; but he was a disappointed man who had been dealt a rough hand in life. In 1812 Hans senior enlisted as a musketeer in the Danish army, a desperate measure to secure a much-needed salary. His timing could hardly have been worse: the Danish economy tanked at the same time as he received his wages, which were decimated (literally: they were reduced to approximately one-tenth of their value). Having made it no further than Holstein, Hans senior returned home in 1814, a sick and broken man.

Two years later, when the improvident shoemaker was dangerously ill, Hans was sent by his mother to solicit the advice of a ‘wise woman’. The old lady ‘made some magic tricks, tied a woollen thread round my wrist and gave me a leaf of what she called “the tree from which Christ’s cross was made”.’ As long as he didn’t see his father’s ghost on the way back home, she told him, his father would live. But he didn’t live, and Hans’s mother chided the crickets for chirping, pointing out that his soul had already been taken. ‘I remembered the previous winter,’ he wrote, ‘when our windows were frozen over; my father had shown us a figure on one of the panes like that of a maiden stretching out both her arms. “She must have come to fetch me,” he said in fun; and now, as he lay dead on his bed, my mother remembered this, and his words occupied my thoughts.’ These details would stay in Hans’s mind, forming an early image in his greatest tale, when the child Kai peeps through a window and sees the shape of a woman, ‘beautiful but all made of ice’, forming out of the snowflakes: the first appearance of the Snow Queen.

Like Kai, Hans could see what was invisible to others. And just as he was able to imagine the secret lives of fir trees, old street lamps and discarded toys, so he was able to imagine a life that most of his neighbours didn’t dare to dream of. Aged thirteen, he talked a visiting theatre troupe into giving him a walk-on part in an operetta of ‘Cinderella’. ‘I was always the first there,’ he wrote, ‘put on the red silk costume, spoke my

line and believed that the whole audience thought only of me.' But he needed his own Cinderella transformation, and since no fairy godmother had presented herself in Odense, he decided to take matters into his own hands. As he told his mother, 'first you have to suffer and then you become famous'. She wasn't keen on letting her only child leave her side, aged just fourteen and a half. But when another 'wise woman' predicted he would become famous, her faith in supernatural foresight trumped her concerns.

To leave home, to go out into 'the big wide world', this was what you had to do to achieve your dreams. It's what Hans's characters do, after all. Some of them may take a remembrance of home, like the Little Mermaid plucking a flower from each of her sisters' sea gardens, but most of them turn away with barely a backward glance and end up – like Thumbelina, who marries a Flower King near the ruins of an African temple – far away from home. Leave, and never come back – that's the message in Hans's tales. If you do come home, then, like the Steadfast Tin Soldier, you're liable to burn.

Early morning, 4 September 1819: at the town gate, a gangly fourteen-year-old hauled himself and his paltry belongings onto the mail coach. The other passengers had already boarded, back at the merchants' inn known as Krombaden's (where, in one of those time warps the fairy tellers' trail occasionally generates, tin soldiers and nutcracker dolls gaze through bottle-glass windows at the old cobbled yard where the mail coach passengers used to embark). The nervous boy pulled himself over the folding steps and squeezed between his stiff-looking fellow passengers, trying to find a comfortable position for his lanky legs. Outside, his mother watched, and his grandmother too. The old woman didn't utter a word of farewell, but Hans was touched by the tears in her eyes.

Out across the fields they rode, and at Nyborg they boarded a ship across the Great Belt, leaving Hans's island of Funen. 'It was as if I was sailing into the wide, wide world,' he recalled. At Korsør, he dropped to his knees and prayed, 'cried a lot but was then happy again', and back on the coach he marvelled at his first sight of the capital: 'When at Frederiksberg I first saw the towers of Copenhagen, for which I had longed so much, I burst into tears, feeling that I had now no one left except God in heaven.'

He needed to travel, not only to Copenhagen but to the big wide world. Like Gerda searching for Kai, or Thumbelina on the swallow's back, or Johannes in 'The Travelling Companion', who sets off for pastures new as soon as he's buried his father. And Hans really would travel: to Germany, Italy, Turkey, even Morocco. As he himself put it: 'To travel is to live. Then life becomes rich and vivid, and you don't, like the pelican, live on your own blood.' Stay in your dreary home town, and you end up consuming yourself. But reach out and roam, and who knows what fruit you'll end up harvesting.

The Tale of the Little Mermaid

The mer-king's palace has everything – walls of coral, amber windows and a beautiful oyster-shell roof. But for all the marvels of this underwater home, his youngest daughter can't wait to experience 'the world above'. On her fifteenth birthday, she is finally allowed to swim to the surface. She sees a ship with a handsome prince on the deck, but a terrible storm strikes, so she swims between the crashing spars to rescue the prince and sets him down on a beach.

Back under the sea, the mermaid can't stop thinking of the people who live in the 'higher world', with their immortal souls (unlike mermaids, who have no souls and turn to foam when they die). So she visits a sea witch who stirs her potions among snakelike polyps and the skeletons of drowned sailors. The witch gives her a potion that turns her tail into legs, but in return she has to let the witch cut out her tongue.

Waking up on a beach, she looks into the eyes of the same handsome prince she rescued from the shipwreck. He leads her into his castle and has her dressed in silk and muslin. Although she can't speak or sing, she wows everyone with her dancing, even though every step hurts like a stab of a knife and she has to soothe her bleeding feet by dipping them in seawater.

Established as a favourite of the prince, she accompanies him on his expeditions, including a journey to meet his bride-to-be. It tears her heart to see how much he loves his fiancée, but it terrifies her too: for her failure to win the prince's love will condemn her to dissolve into foam the morning after his wedding. Only one other way can her life be saved: appearing on the surface of the water, her sisters pass her a magic knife from the sea witch. If she plunges it into the prince's heart, his blood will turn her legs back into a tail and she'll be able to rejoin them under the sea. But the mermaid loves the prince too much to do this. She flings the knife into the sea and throws herself in.

Light voices soar around her, and at the very moment that she's turning to foam, she finds herself ascending, joining the ethereal spirits. Her pure heart, they explain, has elevated her among them, and if she performs

good deeds for three hundred years, she will eventually be granted her own immortal soul.

Chapter 20

‘First You Have to Suffer’

Dank bilge-water seedy with paper cups, bread crusts, fag butts and what might be the tendril of a jellyfish but turns out to be a condom: this is the wrapping around Denmark’s most romantic landmark. Peering across Copenhagen’s harbour, her fluked tail draped across a granite rock, is the forlorn figure of the Little Mermaid. A bronze nude with a hand across her scaled lap, she looks like she’s waiting for somebody to get her out of there.

Visitors pose on the shoreline or kick off their shoes in quest of the perfect selfie. Occasionally, they turn up with weapons. Over the years, the Mermaid has been doused in paint, blasted with holes, had her arms chopped off, been twice decapitated (the first head was never recovered, the second was returned to a nearby TV station), had a dildo attached to her hand, been draped in a burka and slathered with graffiti by movements ranging from Libertarian Marxists to the self-styled Radical Feminist Fraction and mischievous football fans from Sweden.

Personally, I’ve got nothing but sympathy for the poor bronze Mermaid (read enough of Hans’s stories and you can’t help siding with all those statues, toys and other inorganic characters nursing their private heart sores). But from a literary point of view, are these crude attacks really inappropriate? This is the heroine, after all, who submits herself to mutilation for the sake of unrequited love, offering her tongue to the sea witch and suffering the stabbing pain of walking on two legs. Her voicelessness, her careless treatment by the prince as a pet who sleeps by his door, her passive resignation to her fate; all are part of the peculiar appeal of ‘The Little Mermaid’. In the fairy tale canon, this is a contender for the most misogynist one of the lot – which is why revisionists are so keen on it (not just the Disney storyboarders but, more interestingly, novelists who, in recent years, have transformed the mermaid into a

feminist leader or a victim of capitalist exploitation whose body parts are sold to pirates).

But there's another way to read this tale. 'Most of what I have written is a reflection of myself,' insisted Hans. The Little Mermaid is a migrant, turning her back on the comforts of home, grasping for a different life.

'I arrived with my small parcel in Copenhagen, a poor stranger of a boy.' So recorded Hans of his arrival in September 1819. His first port of call was the Royal Theatre. He presented himself to a famous ballerina, Margrethe Schall, showed her a letter of introduction and performed a dance from *Cinderella.* But 'my strange gestures and curious agility caused her to think me out of my mind, and she got rid of me as quickly as possible'. So he found himself renting an attic room in a house that doubled as a brothel (if you ascend the escalator of the Magasin du Nord, past the chocolate pigs and Swedish underwear, you can visit his old digs, with a wood-burning stove and a tiny bed tucked under a slanting roof – just imagining the long-limbed teen with his oversized feet trying to curl himself to sleep here made me wince), rubbing his tears on a painting of his landlady's late husband when he was short of rent, attempting and swiftly abandoning a carpentry apprenticeship (he couldn't bear the teasing of his fellow workers), writing plays that nobody would perform and stories that nobody would print. With his out-of-towner accent and lack of connections, he was nearly as mute as the mermaid: another unusual dancer trying to find his way in a society that saw him as an alien.

Amongst the many strikes against Hans was his appearance. One of the people who knew him best, Edvard Collin, described him around this time as 'a lanky boy with an oblong, old face, pale eyes and pale hair, and a pair of yellow nankeens reaching only to the middle of his shins'. His awkward physique and physiognomy would be the subject of many cutting remarks over the years. Clara Schumann (wife of the composer) called him 'the ugliest thing that can exist' and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's son suggested that 'He is rather like his own ugly duck'. The English poet Edmund Gosse recalled being 'struck, at the first moment, by the grotesque ugliness of his face and hands'. But, like many others, Gosse discovered that closer acquaintance softened this initial hostile impression: 'His eyes, although they were small, had great sweetness and vivacity of expression, while gentleness and ingenuousness breathed from

everything he said.' This was a common pattern: aversion giving way eventually to appreciation.

So it was, among the wealthy families whose patronage Hans courted. 'One has to bow, one has to please!' he wrote in a candid diary entry: 'because one is born poor, he is placed under an obligation and subjection to these richly born people'. His efforts paid off. Not long after his arrival in Copenhagen, he talked his way into the drawing room of the director of the Royal Choir School. He won enough hearts for a subscription to be set up, enabling him to rent a room, and he was accepted into the Royal Ballet School. He did the rounds of the great and good, singing and reciting at various dinner parties, where he was received with a mixture of condescension and charity. His appearance and poor education worked against him – the only role the Royal Danish Ballet could find for him was a troll, and when a play he wrote was rejected by the Royal Theatre, its board of directors recommended sending him to a grammar school in Slagelse, on the other end of the island from Copenhagen.

He was miserable there. The headmaster was one of those merciless pedagogues you find in Dickens novels, forbidding the young storyteller from imaginative writing and ordering him to satisfy himself with the humblest of prospects. But, like bees making honey or spiders spinning webs, Hans couldn't help pouring out his creativity. He jotted down tales, including one about a tallow candle, which remained unpublished and was only discovered, by accident, in 2012. It tells of a candle, the spawn of a sheep and a melting pot, disheartened about its lack of purpose in life until it meets a tinderbox that sets it alight. Now, the teenage fairy teller tells us, it 'had found its place in life – and proved that it was a real candle which shone for a long time to the delight of itself and its fellow creatures'. Although the tale is very short, it expresses the challenge that Hans was undergoing: only by giving delight to others would he be able to enjoy a measure of happiness for himself.

The philanthropist who had arranged his place in Slagelse was a jurist called Jonas Collin, whose family became the most important connection in Hans's life. 'I was in some way really afraid of the father [Jonas],' he recorded, 'due to the fact that I regarded him as my life's destiny, indeed, my entire existence depended upon him.' Jonas's son, Edvard, became a lifelong friend, who would give Hans feedback on his work, negotiate his publishing contracts, and to whom Hans would leave his estate; and

Edvard's sister Louise was the object of Hans's affection for a time (her engagement to another man in 1833 left him distraught). It was through friends like the Collins that he was able to step across the threshold into Copenhagen society and seek an audience for his early works.

Among these was a poem, 'The Dying Child', printed in the *Copenhagen Post* when he was just twenty-two. With its sentimentality and religious passion, it hit the zeitgeist of the 1820s and won him many admirers. But he was barely getting started. During the course of his twenties, he brought out a couple of operas, a poetic drama, several vaudevilles, three collections of poetry, some lyrical dialogues, a fictional picaresque (in which the narrator meets, among others, St Peter and a talking cat) and a travelogue about Germany.

This restless output was getting him known, but it was in 1835 that he made his mark. A first full-length novel appeared, *The Improvisatore* (which, he exulted, 'gained me respect among the noblest and best of people'), and he produced a booklet entitled *Eventyr, fortalte for Børn – Fairy Tales Told for Children*.[FN1]

Its success was not a foregone conclusion. The first review, in the journal *Dannora*, suggested the tales 'will certainly not have any edifying effect', taking particular offence at 'The Princess on the Pea', and the reviewer expressed the hope 'that the talented author . . . will not waste any more of his time in writing fairy tales for children'. Another review, in the *Danish Literary Gazette*, insisted 'it is no empty convention that one must not put one's words together in the same disorderly fashion as one may do perfectly acceptably in oral speech'. Even Hans's own acquaintances were ambivalent. 'Several of my friends whose judgments I valued,' he recalled, 'advised me definitely not to write any more fairy tales.'

But, for all the negativity, Hans was gratified by the reactions of the very people best able to judge his tales. 'Wherever I go,' he wrote in June 1836, 'and there are children they have read my fairy tales, and bring me the loveliest roses and give me a kiss.' The popularity of the tales was driven by the very same issues that had aggravated the critics: children were enchanted because Hans addressed them in a familiar, conspiratorial tone, the voice of an oral teller sitting in the room beside you; and because the earthy, mischievous storylines gave more attention to entertainment than edification. More tangibly than any other children's author, Hans

connected with his readers' experiences. His tales swung between attractive fantasy settings and recognisable locations like nurseries and flower gardens, and he furnished them with objects – such as tin soldiers, candles and spinning tops – that surrounded the children as they listened to the tales. 'All right, we will start the story', begins the invitational opening to 'The Snow Queen'; 'The Tinderbox' springs open with the dramatic sound of a marching soldier: 'Left . . . right! Left . . . right!' To Hans's young, early readers, it felt as if he was on their level. As one of them put it, 'I do like your fairy tales so much that I would like to go and see you . . . when Papa comes home from Africa I will ask him to take me . . .' (The child was called Anna Mary Livingstone, and her father was the famous explorer.)

With the appearance of his third volume of fairy tales in 1837 (including the instant classic, 'The Little Mermaid'), Hans's reputation was sealed. The following year, he was awarded an annual grant from the king, releasing him from the financial anxieties that had burdened him since arriving in Copenhagen. He marvelled at the success he was enjoying, confiding to a friend: 'The first ones I wrote were, as you know, mostly old ones I had heard as a child . . . The ones that were my own creations, such as "The Little Mermaid" . . . were the most popular, however, and that has given me inspiration.'

Lonely Hans

'I sit with my gaily coloured slippers in my dressing gown, with my legs put up on the sofa,' wrote Hans in 1838, describing his daily life in a letter; 'the stove purring, the tea urn singing on the table, and I enjoy a smoke. Then I think of the poor boy in Odense wearing his wooden shoes, and then my heart melts, and I bless the Lord.'

The red-painted building where he rented his rooms, overlooking the canal in Nyhavn, a short walk from the tiny attic, faces several eateries named for Hans's tales – a golden-breasted naiad adorning the canopy of 'The Mermaid' a few doors down from 'The Tinderbox'. And Hans is still there – at least, an animatronic Hans, in top hat and tails, poring over his book in a souvenir shop in the basement, surrounded by plastic mermaids, toy soldiers and editions of his tales in more than a dozen languages.

But if success fastened around him, and held on tight for the next four decades, it didn't resolve the problem that dogged Hans until his final days: loneliness.

In his early years away from Odense, Hans used to wander around the park of Frederiksberg Palace and other similar places, addressing songs and speeches to the flowers and the birds. Once, he recalled, a stable boy 'asked me if I was mad, whereupon I sneaked away, silent and embarrassed'. Such incidents reflected his imaginative restlessness, his eccentricity, and also his yearning for companionship. To answer that need, he was drawn to many young women, amongst whom one of the first was the kindly Louise Collin. In gratitude for the comfort she gave when others were teasing him, Hans presented her with paper-cuttings – the surreal patterns he cut out with scissors, drawing on his remarkable eye for visual detail. An earlier love interest was Riborg Voigt, daughter of a well-off merchant, who became the subject of a love poem; a letter she wrote to him would be found in a pouch around his neck when he died. There were several others, including the opera star Jenny Lind, who dominated his passions in the 1840s. But somebody as idiosyncratic-looking as Hans was never going to have it easy, and to make things even harder, he was wrestling with his own personal hang-ups.

His discomfort with sex is on display in a diary entry from 1834. Visiting his artist friend Küchler in Rome, the twenty-nine-year-old Hans recalled being abashed by a teenage model who'd come with her mother:

> Küchler said he wanted to see what her breasts looked like; the girl seemed a little bashful because I was there, but the mother said 'fiddle-faddle' and loosened her dress and pulled it and her shift all the way down to her waist . . . As the mother exposed her, I could feel my whole body tremble. Küchler saw that I went pale and asked me if there was anything wrong with me.

As awkward in the world of sex as Ivan Khudiakov, Hans shuddered at the deluge of sensuality around him. 'I had no peace from the pimps,' he wrote while in Naples in 1834: 'a boy ten or twelve years old pursued me down the length of the street, speaking of this *donna multa bella, excellenza!* I got really randy, but still resisted the temptation anyway.'

Alongside these sexual frustrations was a deeper ambiguity over sexuality and the constraints of gender, which he expressed through cross-dressing scenes in an early novel and, more directly, in letters to Edvard

Collin, the son of his benefactor and a close personal confidant. When he first met Edvard, as a gangly teenager, Hans feared ‘that he could not stand me, that he was arrogant, and even my enemy’. Over the years, however, warmer feelings developed. Writing to Edvard in 1833, he declared: ‘my very softness, my semi-womanliness allowed me to cling to you when I managed to see so many other glorious qualities in you . . . If only you could understand my love’. In another letter, in 1835, he told Edvard: ‘I long for you, as if you were a lovely girl from Calabria, with her dark eyes and stirring glance.’

Edvard, a stiffly conventional figure who refused to address him by the informal pronoun and sent him ruthless assessments of his work, was an unfortunate object for Hans’s passion. In 1834, his damning verdict on ‘Agneta’, an early mermaid tale, ‘shook me profoundly to the core of my being’. The fact that Edvard accompanied his feedback with news of the sudden death of Hans’s mother’s didn’t help, and the following day, the fairy teller wrote: ‘How close I was to ending this cursed life.’ In a book published after Hans’s death, Edvard wrote about ‘how diseased a mind he had’, insisting that Hans ‘was aware of his illness, but had no idea what to do about it, and he was often truly unhappy about it’.

The scholars I met in Denmark all robustly insisted that Hans was neither gay nor bisexual, and maybe that’s true. However, later in life he developed a touching friendship with a young ballet dancer, Harald Scharff, which he marked in his diary as his ‘erotic period’. In one entry, from March 1862, Hans recorded: ‘a visit from Scharff . . . exchanged with him all the little secrets of the heart. I long for him daily.’ In another entry he declared, ‘joy, some kind of sexual fulfilment and an end to loneliness’. The relationship horrified the Collin family, and it dissolved when Scharff became engaged to a female dancer. But it was a small island of companionship in the lonely sea of Hans’s life.

Riding to Fairyland

To the Tivoli Park: Copenhagen’s Pleasure Island since 1843, it combines the latest in roller-coaster technology with a celebration of national heritage. Visitors sip *glögg* at wooden stalls and photograph themselves in front of the old steam train; a Ferris wheel squeals over a traditional

pantomime theatre where the stagecraft is derived from nineteenth-century practice, and among the costumes under the trapdoor are shiny tin soldiers, feathery ballerinas and furry-eared mice.

With Chinese-style pagodas and a camel-shaped roller coaster, this is oriental kitsch, the world of *The Thousand and One Nights* ready for consumption. It's no coincidence that Hans published his oriental fairy tale, 'The Nightingale', about an artificial bird singing for a Chinese emperor, in 1843, the year the Tivoli was founded. And it's hard to imagine him being disappointed by a ride on The Flying Trunk. After all, it's themed around his own tales.

Hold the steel bar and sit tight! Along the track you sweep, tilting past the witch and soldier from 'The Tinderbox', spinning behind a cloth-brained Emperor with No Clothes, whirling past Thumbelina as she pops out of a tulip. Flashing in a magic mirror, the Devil glowers from a blood-red backdrop while Gerda rides her reindeer towards the glittering podium where the Snow Queen holds frosty Kai in her grasp. Here is Hans's uncanny valley, flickering vignettes fashioned from his tales, where visitors are saluted by an animatronic Hans in a top hat, declaring, 'life is the best fairy tale of all'.

For any lover of traditional tales, it's hard to imagine a more delightful fairground ride (straight-up confession: I went round twice). There isn't time to dwell on characters, famous lines or plot twists. Instead, these gaudy dioramas celebrate the range of settings: playrooms and palaces, flower beds and snowscapes, sinister forests and a turbulent sea. Hans's tales really travel.

'To be a traveller is surely the happiest lot,' he wrote in his early memoir *Shadow Pictures* (published 1831). To travel was to be alive, to feel oneself a part of the world; so it's no wonder that so many of his fairy tales are built around journeys – Gerda riding to the Snow Queen's palace, Thumbelina flying to the Maghreb, the Little Mermaid abandoning the mer-king's realm for life above the sea. With vivid economy, Hans was able to capture the settings of his stories, from the bustle of an Italian city (in 'The Shadow'), where shoemakers bring out their work benches and women gossip on straight-backed chairs, to the mountain drama of the Jura (in 'The Ice Maiden'), where snow-melt drips with the sound of carillons and each drop burns with a blue-white flame. The same observational energy animates his magical landscapes, so the Little

Mermaid's home feels as real as Mount Jura, with its amber windows and walls made of coral, sealed by a roof of oyster shells 'that are continually opening and closing'. The descriptions are rarely static: fishes swim in and out of the windows of the mermaid's palace, eating from the princess's hands, and among the fiery-red and deep-blue trees in the park, 'their branches and leaves were ever in motion'. This is the dynamic descriptive style of a traveller who saw a world 'always changing, ever in motion', like the roiling sea over which Elisa travels to her brothers' island in 'The Wild Swans'.

Eventyr: Hans's stories were 'adventures', and so was his life. It was travel that set him in motion as a fairy teller. 'In 1831,' he wrote, 'during a journey to Hartzen, the true spirit of the fairy tale came to me for the first time.' It was during his travels in Germany that he conceived his first original fairy tale, 'Little Ida's Flowers' (published in the first collection of 1835), which 'came to me during a visit to the poet Thiele, while I was telling his little daughter about the flowers in the botanical gardens'. Over the years many other tales would be coaxed by journeys. He dreamed up 'The Shadow' in Naples, set down the first chapter of 'The Snow Queen' near Dresden, wrote 'The Teapot' in Toledo and visited the International Exposition in Paris in 1867 so he could build his beguiling tale 'The Wood Nymph' around it (in which a nymph achieves her dream of visiting Paris, dances the cancan in the Mabille Gardens, overhears the rats complaining in the sewers, admires the fish in the aquarium and the flowers of the botanical gardens, and dissolves to a single drop of water under the rising sun).

The journeys provided raw details to pour into his tales, adding to the vivid textures that make his stories so alive, but they also enabled Hans to live the spirit of adventure that drove his imagination. Throughout the 1830s and 1840s, he tumbled out of Denmark, experiencing his own *eventyr.* Crossing the Alps, he saw its 'glass mountains of fairy tale'; when he visited Rome, he likened it to the 'magnificent enchanted palaces' of *The Thousand and One Nights.* The man who could say that 'Every character is from life' was a character in his own life-long fairy tale. So it's no surprise that he started writing fairy tales soon after an extensive journey across Europe.

He may not have met any sorcerers (they'd been left behind in Odense), but he was wowed by wonders all the same. And chief among them, as

you'd expect of a celebrity addict, were the VIPs. After riding in a carriage with the King of Bavaria, he wrote: 'it seemed like a fairy tale that I, the poor shoemaker's son, was flying across the mountains at the side of a king'. In Germany, he called on the Queen of Saxony and the Noble Hereditary Grand Duke in Weimar (the latter, he wrote in a state of barely subdued ecstasy, 'pressed my hand under the table', and he was thrilled to learn that the Grand Duchess had insisted on hearing 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier' while she was in childbed delivering an heir to the duchy). In Paris, he hung out with Alexandre Dumas, 'normally found in bed, even if it was long past midday'. In London, Charles Dickens 'drank a glass of wine with me,[FN2] and so did the present Duke of Wellington'; and at a reception held by Lady Palmerston, many of the guests gave him their cards 'and most of them wanted me to visit them'.

It's only Hans's endearing social clumsiness that makes these accounts digestible. Calling on the Grimms' apartment in Berlin, he presented himself without the customary letter of introduction, 'because', as he put it, 'I hope that my name is not wholly unknown to you'. It turns out that fairy tellers don't always read each other's tales. 'Who are you?' asked Jacob, and when Hans tried to explain, the reply was a peremptory, 'I do not remember to have heard this name.' Reading this passage in Hans's diary, you can almost see the wall of embarrassment rising out of the floorboards. But there was a happy ending in this case: the more sociable of the Grimms, Wilhelm, sought him out and, during a later visit to Berlin, Hans met the brothers several times, and even had the satisfaction of reading them his tales.

Like many insecure people, Hans was intensely social and lived for these moments of glad-handing. But he was able to put aside personal hang-ups and embrace the pleasures of his journeys: natural wonders, such as the lava flow of Vesuvius; great art, such as the statues of Rome; new and exciting technology.

Describing a train ride, he wrote: 'I had the feeling that the earth was rotating – close to me the grass and the fields were moving, like a whirling spinning-wheel.' In these words of wonder is the sense of a man trying to capture the spirit of motion around him and bottle it; a spirit of motion he found in himself, a spirit that animates his tales. Self-pitying he may have been, awkward and often unhappy, but his most significant quality is often

overlooked: intrepidity. He was the brave cobbler’s son who ran out of the slums, threw himself on the big wide world, and never stopped.

The Tale of Gerda’s Journey through the Snow

The devil creates a magic mirror that makes everything good appear ugly and horrid. Shattered when his trolls are carrying it heavenwards to mock the angels, its tiny splinters are scattered around the world.

Gerda and Kai, friends living in garrets on either side of a street, play together until one day Kai’s heart and eye are pierced by two shards from the devil’s mirror. The boy turns cruel, mimicking everybody, teasing Gerda and becoming obsessed with facts. When he rides his sled in the square, he attaches it to a bigger one, which carries him all the way to Lapland – he’s been kidnapped by the Snow Queen, who kisses away all memory of Gerda and home with her icy lips.

Although everybody else assumes Kai has drowned, Gerda is sure he must be alive. She rides a rowing boat downriver, fetching up in an old woman’s flower garden. The flowers tell her tales and she nearly forgets about Kai, but she escapes barefooted and finds her way to a palace. She is welcomed by the prince and princess who live there, given boots, mittens and a carriage to ride, as well as candy and fruit. But in a dark forest, the carriage is raided by robbers. The robber woman’s daughter fancies Gerda as a playmate. She stops the others from eating her and instructs a talking reindeer to carry Gerda to the Snow Queen’s palace.

So Gerda rides on the reindeer’s back, under the glittering Northern Lights (which are actually the Snow Queen’s fireworks), stopping at the hut of a Lapp woman, who writes a message to a Finnish woman on a dried codfish; then in the sweltering hut of the Finnish woman, who is able to see inside the Snow Queen’s palace with her magical arts.

Reaching the palace at last, Gerda climbs down from the reindeer and passes a phalanx of snow monsters thanks to the intercession of the angels. The Snow Queen sets off for the volcanoes of Italy, leaving Gerda free to approach Kai, who is black and blue with cold. Her warm tears fall on his breast, melting the ice and the glass splinter inside it, and his memories are awoken. Together, they flee the Snow Queen’s palace and make their

way home, where they find everything unchanged, except that they are no longer children.

Chapter 21

Hans and the Ice Maiden

‘It has been sheer joy for me to put on paper my most recent fairy tale, “The Snow Queen”,’ wrote Hans in December 1843; ‘it permeated my mind in such a way that it came out dancing over the paper.’ He claimed to have written it in just five days, although it wasn’t quite so simple – he’d jotted down the first chapter a few weeks earlier in Germany. But for all its complexity, the tale surges towards its poignant climax with the imaginative intensity of its speedy composition.

As with most of Hans’s invented tales, antecedents can be glimpsed beneath the fluid, glittering surface. The legend of Baldur, banished to the icy regions of Hel in the Norse *Edda*, is echoed in Kai’s self-willed incarceration in the Snow Queen’s palace. The Norwegian tale ‘East of the Sun, West of the Moon’, collected by the folklorists Peter Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe (published in 1841, just two years before ‘The Snow Queen’), anticipates the structure of a girl travelling across an icy Nordic landscape to rescue a wounded boy, with the Norwegian heroine riding a polar bear whereas Gerda goes by reindeer. The Norwegian folk tale echoes ‘Cupid and Psyche’, and we can see Apuleius’ ancient tale whispering through ‘The Snow Queen’ as well: a young woman travelling in search of a wounded male stifled under an older woman’s control; a narrative that corresponds with ‘Beauty and the Beast’.

I’ve travelled in the lore and landscapes of this tale, which as a child was one of my favourites. Sliding over Lapland snowdrifts, under silver crests of candle spruce and pine, I rode on a snowmobile with a Sami herder to visit his reindeer in the woods near Lake Inari; buffed up with gloves, bandannas and padded overalls, our heads bubbled in helmets, we dragged a gear-filled sledge, sliding to the growling of the engine. Snow popped off the ground like bullets, rattling against the windshield, and hung in clumps in the boughs. Tall, snow-clad pines paraded the route, as

if they'd been marshalled by some magical tree-whisperer. As if I'd time-slipped back into my own childhood imagination.

Down the track we flowed, down towards an empty glade. It wasn't empty for long. The reindeer poured out from between the trees in trails of fleecy brown fur, clicking hooves and curling antlers of many tines. Petri scattered a sack of feed and the reindeer rushed, like kids at a birthday party jostling for cake. There were more than a hundred of them, tagged with the herder's distinctive mark – a cut through the left ear. Many were scored across the side and at first I took this for fights – several antlers were locking together around us. But Petri explained these were his own markings, so he could count the animals on the summer round-up.

'If the predators get them, they have to die. Even if they are only injured, there's no point letting a reindeer stay alive if it's lame. So we kill it and sell the meat.'

He had no truck with romanticising the reindeer, and wrinkled his nose when I asked if he'd given any of them names: 'They are not a pet!' A similar pragmatism, curiously enough, can be found in 'The Snow Queen'. The robber girl who sets Gerda up on her reindeer ride is fond of the animals, but she plays tormentingly with her knife, evoking the ambivalent attitude of the Sami, who care for the reindeer but also kill them. And in Hans's imagined mythology there are echoes of Sami belief, in the Sami god of the winds, Bieggolmai, who can 'force the wind out of its cave' and back again. As the historian Paul Binding has written: 'what Andersen puts into the mouth of the reindeer has the authentic mythological ring'.

This illustrates how conscientiously Hans explored the worlds he painted in his tales. It wasn't enough to rely on his imagination: he scoured scientific journals, travelogues and old chronicles (such as Olaus Magnus's sixteenth-century *Description of the Northern Peoples*, which provided the details about magically bound winds ascribed by Hans to the Finnish woman), and marshalled the observations he jotted down on his journeys. Just as he needed to visit the Paris exhibition to write 'The Wood Nymph', so he brought his Nordic travels and reading to bear in conjuring the world of 'The Snow Queen'.

But whilst these details give the story its luminous texture, its greatest power is driven by its personal spirit, which forms around the time-worn structure like patterns of snow and ice congealing around an ancient tree.

As the critic Wolfgang Lederer puts it, ‘The Snow Queen’ is, ‘above all, the story of the redemption of a lonely, inhibited intellectual by the love of a woman’. In this respect, suggests Lederer, in his book-length study, *The Kiss of the Snow Queen*, the story was influenced by the loneliness and frustrated love that haunted Hans’s life and left him ‘with the feeling of being incarcerated in an icy, depressing, eventually deadly jail of his own frustration’.

At every stage, the tale transcends autobiography and swings back to it. It begins in a riverside town, where two children play around the roof ‘garden’ between their windows, which Hans explicitly linked to his childhood home: ‘From the kitchen, with the help of a ladder, you got onto the roof, where, in the gutter between our house and the neighbour’s, was a box of soil with chives and parsley, my mother’s entire garden; it flourishes still in my fairy tale “The Snow Queen”.’ With its farmers’ carts and the proximity of the river, Gerda’s home town is identifiably Odense; meanwhile, the arc of her journey aligns with Hans’s lifelong search for love, and the coldness with which he felt his burning sentiments were repulsed.

The story was written when he was developing strong feelings for the Swedish opera singer Jenny Lind. ‘She sings German,’ he wrote, ‘the way I suppose I read my tales – where I come from shows through; but as they say about me, this adds something interesting.’ Like Hans, Jenny was ‘so strangely tender’, to quote a friend of hers, ‘that she is easily wounded’; and like him, she had been catapulted from humble origins to unimaginable success. That Hans was sexually attracted to Jenny is beyond doubt. In a wave of diary entries in September 1843, he recorded that he had ‘Sent Jenny a poem’, ‘thought of proposing’, ‘said goodbye to Jenny, handed her a letter which she will understand. I love!’ That same year, he penned his charming tale of ‘The Nightingale’, in which a bird’s natural voice wins the affection of a king, over the artificial sound of a mechanical device: the eponymous bird being a version of Jenny, who was known as the ‘Swedish Nightingale’.

The friendship was reciprocated, but Jenny never let it go further, and her coldness could cut him to the core. Once, walking alongside her, Hans was planning to declare his feelings when she chided him: ‘Well Andersen, move those long shanks of yours!’ He said nothing.

There were only so many snubs he could take. At the end of 1845 he recorded in his diary, while staying in Berlin: ‘Haven’t heard anything from Jenny. I’m feeling badly treated and sad!’ A few lines later, he insisted: ‘I don’t love her any more! In Berlin she has cut out the diseased flesh with a cold knife!’ Although they remained on cordial terms, they saw less of each other, and Hans added Jenny to the list of women who had spurned his affection, ice maidens who failed to match the passion pumping out of his own delicate heart.

The End of the Adventure

Pierrots in pantomimic drag are racing down the corridors of the Tivoli Theatre, fresh out of make-up; gaffers with laptops are marshalling lighting technicians with filters and rigs. A door swings open on a practice hall, where nimble legs are making diamond and scissor shapes, sweeping back and forth, lifting upright, as if they’re toy limbs only loosely screwed to their owners’ hips.

These are the bugs and burghers, royalty and robbers, the flowers of a witch’s garden and the frosty minions of the Snow Queen: ballet dancers warming up for a performance of Hans’s tale.

‘I thought this character would be like a princess,’ says Sakura, the Japanese dancer who takes the role of Gerda. ‘But she’s not like that. She became strong through her journey.’

On the stage, Sakura communicates this strength with arms stretched out, flailing against the boards, spinning herself back up. The pierrots waddle around her while electronic pulses beat against the watery strings of the harp and the moody horns. Spikes of ice hang from the headgear of the Snow Queen’s minions, mirroring the pyramids of ice decorating her palace, the geometric patterns articulating the cold rationalism in which Kai is trapped until Gerda bursts into the hall and melts the shard of ice in his heart. The palace fades out, Gerda and Kai float back home, and the ballet dramatises Hans’s enigmatic conclusion – ‘they realised that they had grown,’ as he wrote, ‘they were no longer children’ – with the two friends leaning in for a kiss.

Conventionally, the story has been interpreted as a parable for growing up. But there’s another way to read it: as a tale about how adventures keep

you young. As long as Gerda and Kai are entangled in their *eventyr*, they are still children. Only when the adventure comes to an end is the passage of time confirmed.

‘No fairy tales occur to me any more,’ wrote Hans in the summer of 1874, less than a year before he died.

> It is as if I had filled out the entire circle with fairy tale radii close to one another. If I walk in the garden among the roses – well, what stories they and the snails have told me! If I see the broad leaf of the water-lily, then Thumbelina has already ended her journey on it . . . Thus I do not get any new, fresh impulses, and that is sad.

When there are no more tales to tell, no more adventures to go on, that’s when time comes knocking. Hans’s last story collection had come out two years earlier, in 1872. It included ‘The Cripple’, about a boy called Hans who reads fairy tales that ‘carried him where his legs refused to go – out into the world beyond the cottage walls’ – which Hans considered ‘one of my best stories’. But now, with no more ‘radii’ to draw, it was time to leave the adventures behind. He was like the hero in the Baroness d’Aulnoy’s ‘Isle of Happiness’, who steps back into the real world to discover the years have passed in his absence. When the storytelling ends, the wrinkles start to show.

His final letters and diary entries are the wistful expressions of a mind in retreat. ‘I have now lived to be an old man,’ as he wrote, ‘the Bible’s three score and ten.’ Flooded with requests for autographs, ‘from America, Germany and England’, impatiently waiting for ‘a decoration’ from the Grand Duke of Weimar, he was able to look back on a life full of achievement. He had, as he characteristically put it, ‘drunk my chocolate with the Queen, sitting opposite her and the King at the table’. His stories had managed to break down boundaries across the world, speaking directly to children, more effectively than any of his fairy-telling predecessors, inviting them into the enchanting conspiracy of his tales.

But happier reflections on his life’s success were tempered by sickness and his vulnerability to self-pity. ‘O Lord! Lord! What is going to happen to me, pitiable sick person that I am!’ he declared in one of his last diary entries. For the last few weeks he had to dictate to Mrs Melchior, an old friend who was caring for him, and two days before he died she recorded, ‘he has been repeating, “I do not understand anything. Am I better today? How strange it all is!” ’ On 4 August 1875 she wrote: ‘Now the light has

been extinguished. What a happy death!' It was four months and two days since his seventieth birthday.

On the day of his funeral, flags were flown at half mast all over Copenhagen, and mourners lined the route of the cortège. The king and crown prince were in attendance, along with ministers from Germany and England. The Working Men's Association and numerous guilds held their banners, reflecting the fairy teller's acclaim across every rank of Danish society. It was a national celebration of Denmark's most iconic author, and the only sadness is that Hans couldn't witness it himself.

Three years before he died, he had read to an audience that included the English writer Edmund Gosse: 'he sat beside me,' recalled Gosse,

> with his amazingly long and bony hand – a great brown hand, almost like that of a man of the woods – grasping my shoulder. As he read, the colour of everything, the twinkling sails, the sea, the opposing Swedish coast, the burnished sky above, kindled with sunset. It seemed as if Nature herself was flushing with ecstasy at the sound of Andersen's voice.

Nature, the same spirit the Grimms tried to harness. Or another word for it: 'unselfconsciousness'. Hans believed his stories; that's why his readings had so much power. When he said the snails and roses had told him their tales, he wasn't lying. This is why his writing is so vivid. It's why the stories align so closely with his own life: 'Every character is from life.' He was the Ugly Duckling, the Little Mermaid, Thumbelina, the Steadfast Tin Soldier and Gerda. He was a boy who made a fairy tale around himself, because he knew instinctively it was the best protection against the horrors of life. It kept him safe, and it made him the most celebrated fairy teller who's ever drawn breath. But it also kept him sealed. He ended his life beloved, renowned, acclaimed, and alone.

As for the fairy tale, its story was far from over. Throughout the remaining years of the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, collectors would continue to roam the neglected places, sifting for stories in the wake of the Grimms. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a Jewish Australian called Joseph Jacobs collected together English tales, standardising 'Tom Thumb', 'Jack and the Beanstalk', 'Child Roland' and his journey to the dark tower (one of the oldest known fairy tales in Europe), along with many others. Ever widening their terrain, story searchers trekked around the world, declaring discoveries with the shiny new stories that traditional communities had been telling for millennia.

But the creation of new tales had reached a turning point. Hans would certainly not be the last to pen inventive new fairy tales. During his lifetime, and in the years after his death, writers as accomplished as John Ruskin, Oscar Wilde and George MacDonald would present their own contributions to the genre; many of these tales enjoyed tremendous success in their time, and many are still read today. But none would match the sustained success enjoyed by Hans. He had been perfectly situated between the old world of pre-industrial Odense and the commercial opportunities of prosperous Copenhagen. No later fairy teller would be able to harness that perfectly calibrated alignment of traditionalism and originality that made Hans so unique.

But it's beyond the fairy tale that his success can best be measured. Compared with Hans, the other spinners of new fairy tales had little influence on the emerging forms of stories for children. But the illustrated books that dominated the next century would be moulded out of prototypes that Hans did much to popularise. From the talking toys of A. A. Milne and talking animals of Beatrix Potter to the child-catching, sleigh-riding queen of C. S. Lewis (or Philip Pullman's later iteration in *His Dark Materials*), Hans's tales would cast a shadow as agile and dominant as the eerie eponymous shadow of his most macabre tale. The old world was being sealed away, under steam and oil, steel and asphalt, and stories were less likely to be told around hearths and spinning-wheels. But stories of magic would continue to be told, and they would find new ways to make themselves heard.

Epilogue

‘Can you tell me a story from your mouth?’

In the garden under the apple tree, in the kitchen at the end of a meal, in the bedroom after bath time.

I tell the story of Prince Ivan’s quest for the Firebird while we’re collecting the fallen apples, and my son peppers the scaly branches with curious glances:

‘It’s lucky our apples aren’t golden, otherwise it would want to eat them too!’

Fairy tales change. It’s in their DNA. The Tin Soldier becomes a Lego Stormtrooper; Princess Badroulboudour escapes from the sorcerer before Aladdin has managed to reach her; Rapunzel turns her hair into a lasso. Maybe I go too far sometimes, although I’m kind of proud of ‘Baba Yaga and Wile E. Coyote’, in which the *Looney Tunes* ‘genius’ enlists the Russian witch to help him catch the ever-elusive Road Runner. Inevitably, even the craftiest of witches can’t outwit the avian sprinter and poor hapless Wile E. gets himself turned into a frog.

But there is pleasure, too, in ‘Hansel and Gretel’ (‘they should have gone back for the sweets!’), in ‘The Steadfast Tin Soldier’ (‘it would be better for him if he stayed in the tunnel with the rat!’), in ‘The Golden City’ (‘lucky he didn’t fall into the whirlpool!’). A friend’s daughter is weirdly thrilled by ‘Hans My Hedgehog’; a niece wants me to read ‘The Little Mermaid’. One afternoon, I’m embroiled in a mass game of ‘Hide from the scary ogre!’ after narrating Giambattisa Basile’s ‘The Flea’; and I discover that telling stories about Baba Yaga’s bathhouse – with its worms, frogs and rats – isn’t a great idea if you want to avoid mayhem at bath time.

The joy of storytelling is timeless, and despite the ever-multiplying media, children still respond to its purest form: sitting by a bedside, telling a story ‘from your mouth’. Our princesses may be more proactive than some of the traditional ones, more Basilean than Grimm; we may

give our characters names that reflect a more multicultural society; and we're less likely to end with a wedding (although God knows, the next generation will have plenty of bones to pick with our interpretations). But when we indulge in traditional storytelling, we often find we're more connected to the past than many of us admit.

The same characters and narratives continue to appeal. Which is why Disney is still churning out these tales, and advertisers still use them to sell perfume, toothpaste, health pills, fat-free chocolate, Meltin'Pot battery cables (reanimating Sleeping Beauty much faster than a kiss) and countless shoe brands riffing off Cinderella. Hundreds of years after the collectors asked for stories from the sources' mouths, the textures of the storytellers' worlds still cling to their tales, like the mushrooms and bryophytes suckered to forest trees. But if we brush them aside, we find the overarching structures of the tales intact, able to plant themselves anew in other times and cultures.

Over the course of my trail, I tried to work out what makes a 'fairy tale'. An *eventyr*, 'adventure', a *Märchen*, a 'little tale', *hikayah al-khayaliyeh*, a 'story of the imagination'. All these definitions point us in the right direction, more accurately than the Anglo-French description of 'fairy tale'. Reading over a thousand tales, digging into the lives of seven tellers (and a few more outliers), I settled on three key characteristics. One is magic – some element of the supernatural. Another is that the story appeals to children. And the third, which I found expressed in different forms by all the fairy tellers I investigated, is orality. A fairy tale can be a printed text, certainly – the history of the fairy tale *is* the history of the printed text, of stories collected and set down, standardised and mass-distributed. It's a story that aligns with the history of printing – certainly in the West, where it's also hinged to the growth of literacy. But in order to remain a fairy tale, it needs to retain some flavour of its oral roots.

Although I didn't know this when I made my selection, all the fairy tellers I chose to follow were connected to this oral culture. Giambattista Basile wrote in the vernacular, capturing the cadences of Neapolitan speech. Hanna Dyab recited tales he'd heard in Aleppo. Dortchen Wild recited stories too, and transmitted stories she'd heard from other oral sources. Somadeva's *The Ocean of the Streams of Story* was composed to soothe his queen, and implicit in its construction is the idea of performance. Ivan Khudiakov collected stories from villagers, setting

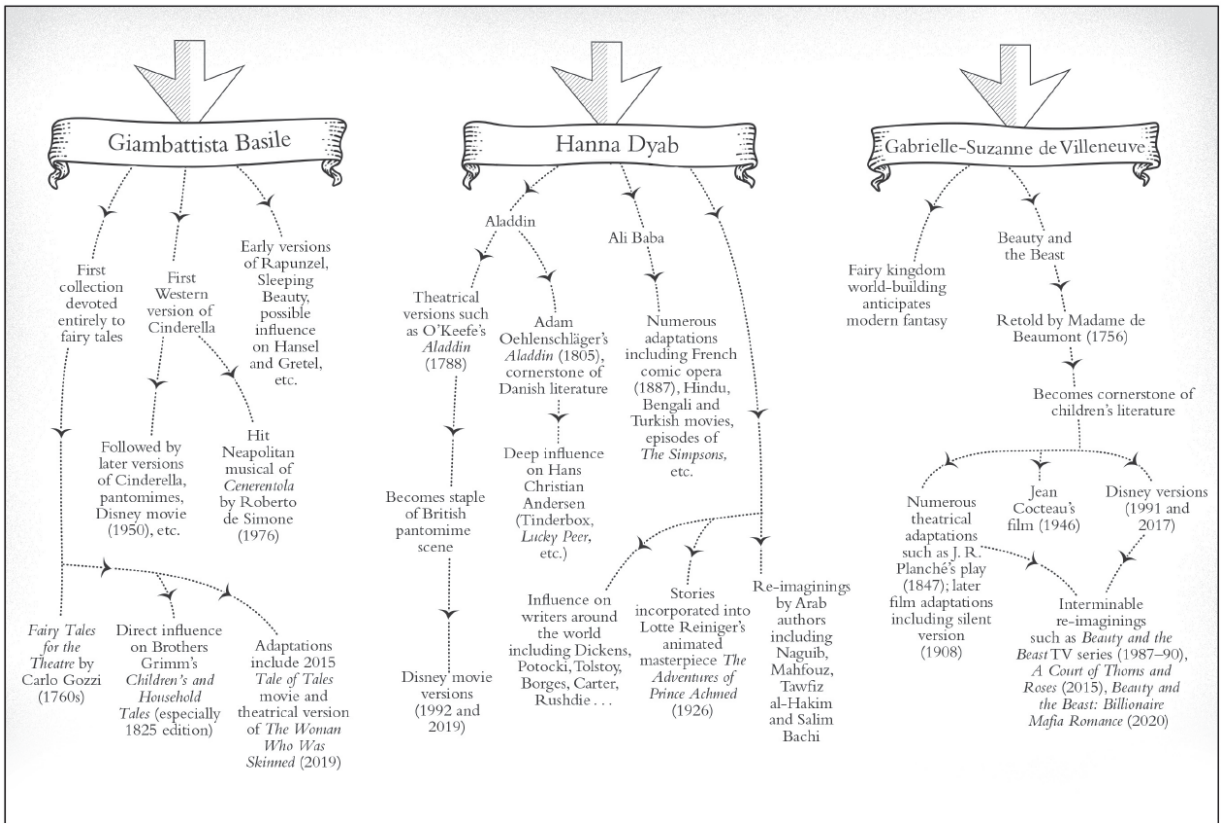
them down in their rawest form. As for Hans Christian Andersen, he also recalled stories he'd been told, and as he put it to a friend, 'I have written them completely as I would tell them to a child.' Only in the case of Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve does this oral quality become inconspicuous. More reclusive than the other tellers, she produced her stories in a market of illicit texts; she was responding to other written texts by the *conteuses* who preceded her.

And yet, even in Gabrielle-Suzanne's case, orality bleeds through. 'Beauty and the Beast' is told by a chambermaid to her charge, to while away the boredom of a sea journey. In its literary performance, it is an oral tale, just as it belongs to a tradition that grew out of story exchanges in the salons. And it's a story that has risen off the page, with all the plays and films it's inspired, a story that is seen and heard more than it is read.

In choosing these tellers, I was aware of the risk that any selection runs, the ease with which a personal selection can be picked apart. I wanted to probe the history of the fairy tale across the centuries, to celebrate tellers who were deeply connected to the places that spawned their tales, and to celebrate different kinds of tellers – not only the collectors but also the sources, as well as two inventors of original tales (both Hans Christian Andersen and Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, although she tends to be given less credit for this; regardless of whether her 'Beauty and the Beast' is original, other tales like 'The Naiads' certainly are).

The story of the traditional fairy tale ends in the later part of the nineteenth century. Within Hans's own lifetime, the children's book industry was already turning into its own engine, another dynamo in the jolting world of perpetual motion he observed. A decade before Hans's death, Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and approached the artist John Tenniel to do the illustrations. Many more brilliant children's stories would follow over the subsequent decades, brilliant stories that still work as live story-telling experiences, such as Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), Margery Williams's *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922), Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wilds Things Are* (1963), or more recently Julia Donaldson's *The Gruffalo* (1999) and *Room on the Broom* (2001). And this is without reckoning with the work of graphic artists, screen animators and artists in many other forms who have developed new tales with elements of faerie. The human imagination

never stops, and nor does its capacity to reprocess narrative ideas from long ago and make them new.


Giambattista Basile
First collection devoted entirely to fairy tales
First Western version of Cinderella
Early versions of Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, possible influence on Hansel and Gretel, etc.
Followed by later versions of Cinderella, pantomimes, Disney movie (1950), etc.
Hit Neapolitan musical of *Cenerentola* by Roberto de Simone (1976)
Fairy Tales for the Theatre by Carlo Gozzi (1760s)
Direct influence on Brothers Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales* (especially 1825 edition)
Adaptations include 2015 *Tale of Tales* movie and theatrical version of *The Woman Who Was Skinned* (2019)
Hanna Dyab
Aladdin
Ali Baba
Theatrical versions such as O'Keefe's *Aladdin* (1788)
Adam Oehlenschläger's *Aladdin* (1805), cornerstone of Danish literature
Numerous adaptations including French comic opera (1887), Hindu, Bengali and Turkish movies, episodes of *The Simpsons*, etc.
Becomes staple of British pantomime scene
Deep influence on Hans Christian Andersen (Tinderbox, *Lucky Peer*, etc.)
Disney movie versions (1992 and 2019)
Influence on writers around the world including Dickens, Potocki, Tolstoy, Borges, Carter, Rushdie . . .
Stories incorporated into Lotte Reiniger's animated masterpiece *The Adventures of Prince Achmed* (1926)
Re-imaginings by Arab authors including Naguib, Mahfouz, Tawfiz al-Hakim and Salim Bachi
Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve
Fairy kingdom world-building anticipates modern fantasy
Beauty and the Beast
Retold by Madame de Beaumont (1756)
Becomes cornerstone of children's literature
Numerous theatrical adaptations such as J. R. Planché's play (1847); later film adaptations including silent version (1908)
Jean Cocteau's film (1946)
Disney versions (1991 and 2017)
Interminable re-imaginings such as *Beauty and the Beast* TV series (1987–90), *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015), *Beauty and the Beast: Billionaire Mafia Romance* (2020)

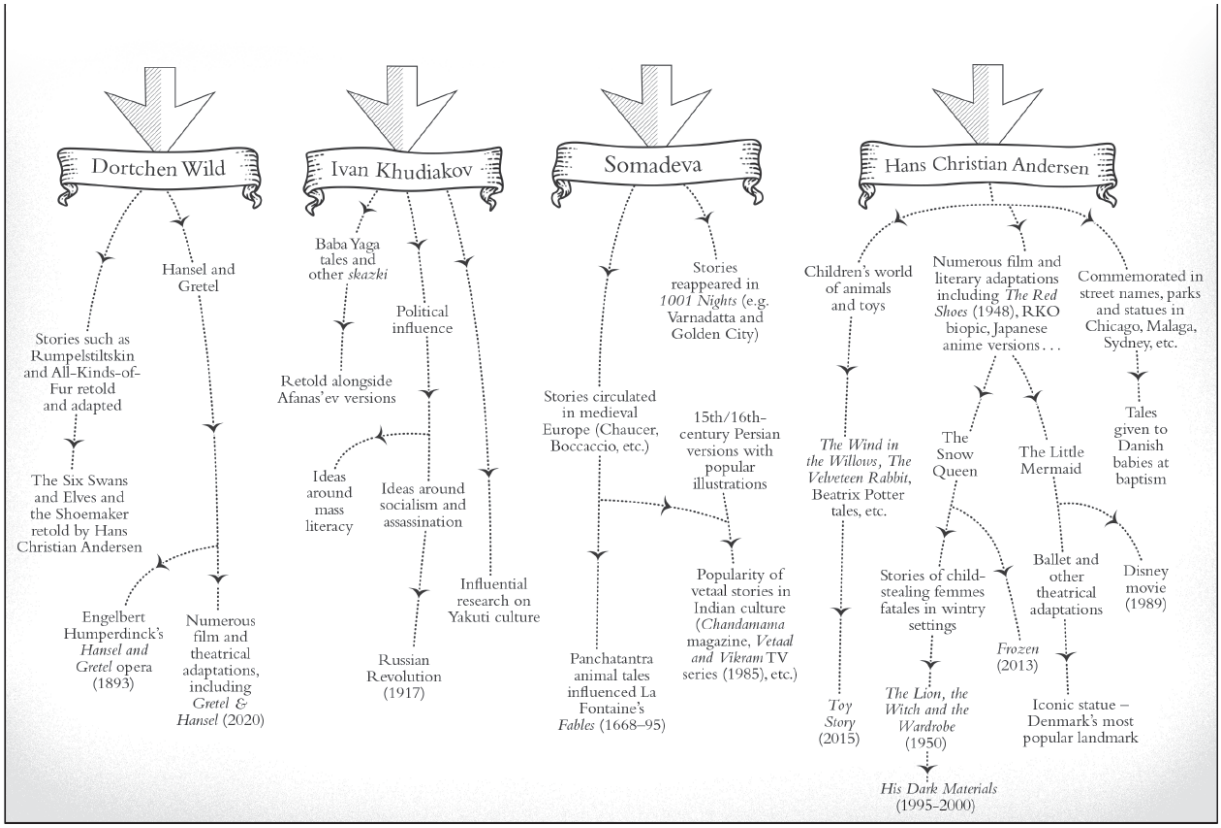

Dortchen Wild
Hansel and Gretel
Stories such as Rumpelstiltskin and All-Kinds-of-Fur retold and adapted
The Six Swans and Elves and the Shoemaker retold by Hans Christian Andersen
Engelbert Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel* opera (1893)
Numerous film and theatrical adaptations, including *Gretel & Hansel* (2020)
Ivan Khudiakov
Baba Yaga tales and other *skazki*
Political influence
Retold alongside Afanas'ev versions
Ideas around mass literacy
Ideas around socialism and assassination
Influential research on Yakuti culture
Russian Revolution (1917)
Somadeva
Stories reappeared in *1001 Nights* (e.g. Varnadatta and Golden City)
Stories circulated in medieval Europe (Chaucer, Boccaccio, etc.)
15th/16th-century Persian versions with popular illustrations
Popularity of vetal stories in Indian culture (*Chandamama* magazine, *Vetaal and Vikram* TV series (1985), etc.)
Panchatantra animal tales influenced La Fontaine's *Fables* (1668–95)
Hans Christian Andersen
Children's world of animals and toys
Numerous film and literary adaptations including *The Red Shoes* (1948), RKO biopic, Japanese anime versions . . .
Commemorated in street names, parks and statues in Chicago, Malaga, Sydney, etc.
The Wind in the Willows, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, Beatrix Potter tales, etc.
The Snow Queen
The Little Mermaid
Tales given to Danish babies at baptism
Stories of child-stealing femmes fatales in wintry settings
Ballet and other theatrical adaptations
Disney movie (1989)
Frozen (2013)
Toy Story (2015)
The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe (1950)
Iconic statue – Denmark's most popular landmark
His Dark Materials (1995–2000)

Figure 3: The legacies of the fairy tellers.

But the new stories are bound by their book form in ways the traditional tales of the past were not. They are hinged to specific illustrations and production models, less connected to the oral culture that created the fairy tale, less free to be reinterpreted. It would be the purpose of a different book to explore the lives of these fascinating, later inventors of tales. Such a book would reflect a world pressing closer in some respects towards equality. But because these stories' success is entwined with capitalist market forces, they offer a less representative cross section of the global imagination. One thing that can be said for the traditional fairy tale is that it came from many corners of the world. The story of the children's book that followed is the story (depressingly, in my view) of not only Western but anglophone economic domination.

Although this book covers many centuries, I was surprised by how much material there was to find. Considering how badly some of these tellers were treated by the establishment of their times – whether spiteful reviews or cynical scheming, incarceration or plain ignominy – each of them has

managed to survive the blowout of historical obscurity, leaving behind impressive legacies that endure to this day (see Figure 3).

When I started my first tentative steps on this trail, it felt as if the trees were too close together to show me the way. But slowly the light began to prise the trunks apart, and a path revealed itself, curling, occasionally forking, often narrowing, moving steadily towards the heart of the forest. And it was always a forest – whether the stories came from Italy or India, from the Ryazan region of Russia or the German Rhineland. For Somadeva, as for the Grimms, Giambattista Basile and Ivan Khudiakov, the forests are the places where characters are tested. They go for refuge and guidance, fleeing a band of warriors in southern India (like Somadeva's hero Lohajangha) or, like Hansel and Gretel, being dumped among the trees by unkind parents. Even in the Arabian tales, forests appear as sanctuaries of magic – as for Ali Baba – although their place is often taken by deserts, especially the ones with mysterious caves.

So now we step alongside the tellers, taking our last walk with them. Somadeva remains faint, always a little too far down the path to see him clearly; but the others bunch up closer. Here's Giambattista, brushing a few pine needles off his doublet, offering a sugary *sfogliatella* while we wait for the others to catch up. 'They're like magpies, this lot, it's like they're treading on eggs!' Hanna steps over a clump of ferns, expressing his wonder at so many trees. Giambattista offers his arm to Gabrielle-Suzanne, but she flashes her dark eyes at him and makes her own way, while Dortchen hurries behind her, trying in the kindest possible way to shrug off Hans's enquiries about her husband. Bringing up the rear is our gloomiest teller, Ivan, and nobody can find the magic words to bring him out of his funk. Besides, as he points out, this forest doesn't have enough streams. In that respect at least, Somadeva, all the way ahead, fading in the brightness of the glade, is in agreement.

They've guided us as deep into the forest as we can dare to go, and now it's best to leave them – there's almost certainly bound to be some dispute before long. Best if we tiptoe back along the path, before Giambattista's calling everybody a noodlehead and Hans is in tears: 'May God forgive those who have wounded me so!'

This is only one path, and there are many others. Along the way there was joy as well as heartbreak, a few alarming dangers, occasionally horrible meanness (and some really cutting reviews!). But they have

brought us to our destination: the ogre’s hut, the witch’s house, the Beast’s enchanted palace, the robbers’ den, the hidden temple.

The enlightenment at the heart of the forest.

Some people come back with jewels pouring out of their mouths, some are covered in pitch or charred with fire. Whatever their experience, everybody returns from the forest knowing more about themselves than when they set out. Tales and trails intertwine, and every one of them is a magic mirror. Like the tellers, we can look into this mirror to see the world – in its splendour and madness and brutality – and if we look carefully enough, we see ourselves peering back.

Acknowledgements

I’m indebted to the many people who helped me in the research and writing of this book.

One of the most daunting aspects of researching *The Fairy Tellers* was attempting to breach the citadel of fairy tale scholarship, and I am grateful to the many experts who responded kindly to my questions and requests, helping me to better understand the lives and work of the fairy tellers who feature in this book.

I am particularly grateful to Nancy Canepa, who was always very encouraging and full of insights, exchanging material and thoughts about Giambattista Basile. In Italy, thank you to the members of the Accademia dei Dogliosi for welcoming me in Avellino, especially their president Dr Fiorentino Vecchiarelli. Also thank you to the actors Salvatore d’Onofrio and Carmine Maringola for talking to me about their brilliant performance of *La Scortecata.*

In France, thanks to Thierry Vincent for talking to me about his production of *Beauty and the Beast* and sending me the play script. In Denmark, thank you to Dr Anne Klara Bom and Dr Ejnar Stig Askgaard. Thanks also to everyone at the Tivoli Theatre in Copenhagen, especially Peter Bo Bendixen and Peer. Thank you to the cast of *Snedronningen* for talking to me about Andersen’s tale and their roles in it, and to the staff of the Tivoli Theatre for additional support.

In Finland, thank you to my amazing host in Tampere, Ville Noroila, and his family (and thanks Larissa for the intro!), also thanks to everyone I met in Lapland. A huge thank you to Noora Barria at the SnowCastle in Kemi, and everyone there who answered my questions and gave me such an interesting experience, including a night at a snow hotel.

In Germany, thanks to Mirko Zapp and everyone at Grimmwelt in Kassel, the guild of the Hexensabbat in Waldkirch and the opera house in Giessen, in particular the opera director Moritz Gogg.

Among the many experts who gave me their time, I am grateful to Chirine el-Ansari, Hanan al-Shaykh, Gayathri Prabhu, Arshia Sattar, Brian Stableford, Bernhard Lauer, Sibelan Forrester, Robert Chandler and Jack Zipes.

I was fortunate to be given a month's residency at the Jan Michalski Foundation in Switzerland, which was a great place to spend some time writing and thinking. I am very grateful to Vera Michalski-Hoffmann, Guillaume Dollmann, Chantal Buffet and everybody at the JMF, and also to my fellow writers Piotr, Ania, Jenny, Isabelle and Marina, whose company was always such a joy.

Thanks to Neil Walker for refreshing my memory of our lawn play from long ago (and for arranging the marvellous fairy tale tower on the college lawns!).

For help with translations, I am grateful to Marine Boussac-Maltby (French), Gerlinde Schermer-Rauwolf (German), Marina Skalova (Russian) and Nancy Canepa (Neapolitan).

For their suggestions and advice on early drafts of the book, I am very grateful for the feedback I received from Poppy Maltby, Jennifer Croft, Carrie Plitt, Nancy Canepa, Kate Forsyth, Gayathri Prabhu, Arshia Sattar, Sibelan Forrester and Ejnar Stig Askgaard.

This is my third book with John Murray and I'd like to salute everyone for their work on it, including those whose endeavours will only become apparent after the book has gone to press. My editor, Joe Zigmond, has been an incisive and wonderfully challenging collaborator throughout this project, and I greatly appreciate his rigorous editorial input. Thanks also to Kate Craigie, to Rosie Collins for the design work, to Sara Marafini and the cover team, Rachael Duncan for publicity, and to Caroline Westmore and Hilary Hammond for their thorough and detailed work on the copy-edit, and to Judy Spours for her proofreading. Thanks also to my agent, Carrie Plitt, and everybody at Felicity Bryan Associates, who I hope will be giving this book lots of support as it goes out into the world.

Writing during a global pandemic was of course something of a challenge, but I couldn't have wished for a more supportive family, and I'm grateful to my wife Poppy for all the encouragement she gives me, and to Milo and Rafe for everything they've taught me, especially about dinosaur fossils, apparating spells and the technical specifications of Lego spaceships.

This book is dedicated to my brother and sister, Anne-Marie and Christopher, with whom I shared my first experiences of fairy tales and my first adventures into imaginary worlds. Thank you for every step we took together, and I’m sorry if my love of such stories made my grip on the real world a little blurry at times.

Sources and Further Reading

Prologue

The Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index was updated by Hans-Jörg Uther in 2004 as *The Types of International Folktales: A Classification and Bibliography* (published by Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, Helsinki).

The quotation from Apuleius (‘an enormous snake’) is from the Penguin edition of *The Golden Ass*, p. 79.

Part One: A Snail at the Foot of a Mountain

For readers interested in reading Giambattista Basile’s stories, I recommend Nancy Canepa’s fantastic translation of *The Tale of Tales*, published by Penguin in 2016. My quotes from this edition are as follows: ‘There is nothing in the world’, p. 11; ‘woodsy scene’, p. 5; ‘the prince of Round Field’, p. 5; ‘to instil in the slave’s heart’, p. 9; ‘big-nosed Tolla’, p. 10; ‘the sort that old women’, p. 11; ‘completely destroyed or crippled’, p. 108; ‘sallow colour’, p. 163; ‘Flower of cities’, p. 66; ‘the Spanish woman displeased him’, p. 163; ‘black crow’, ‘me no thick-lipped slave’, p. 448; ‘who draped with black mourning’, pp. 449–50; ‘Sonnets arrived in a frenzy’, p. 272; ‘hardly appropriate for her status’, p. 275; ‘and they were more satisfied’, p. 275; ‘Here I go, my beautiful Naples’, p. 65; ‘raising people you wouldn’t deign to kick out of a bean field’, p. 13; ‘the ringleader of all fleas’, p. 50; ‘What sort of bad manners’, p. 51; ‘in the midst of plenty’, p. 53; ‘the flower of all tenderness’, p. 92; ‘a harpy in the place of a nymph’, p. 96; ‘I skinned myself, sister’, p. 100; ‘I am a woman who knows how to take’, p. 170; ‘Oh father, cruel father’, p. 51; ‘the rivers complained’, p. 52; ‘his forehead all lumpy’, p. 14; ‘supplied them with what they needed’, p. 354; ‘buffoons rewarded’, p. 135; ‘dark as a clogged chimney’, p. 52; ‘now you can’t complain’, p. 53; ‘see straight through’, p. 15; ‘with so many servants’, p. 60; ‘like iron runs to a magnet’, p. 62; ‘fart throat, gas mouth,’ p. 19; ‘I left, one foot’, p. 456.

Quotations from the original Neapolitan are from *Lo cunto de li cunti overo lo trattenemiento de peccerille* (Roma-Bari: Gius. Laterza & Figli, 1976): ‘Ah zaccaro’ is from p. 8; ‘Zitto non pipitare’ is from p. 343.

Giambattista was described by a contemporary in *Le glorie degli Incogniti* (1647): ‘his perpetual cheerfulness of spirit’, ‘the true epitome of an exquisitely refined gentleman’ , trans. Canepa in *Tale of Tales* (p. xl). The ‘ungrateful shores’ is from his *Le avventurose disavventure* (1611), quoted in Canepa, p. xxxvi.

I have quoted Campanella’s *City of the Sun* (‘all things are common’, ‘both sexes are instructed’), pp. 275 and 277. The quote from Cortese is from Canto V, line 29 of *Journey to Paranassus*, quoted in Luca degli Innocenti et al., *Interactions between Orality and Writing in Early Modern Italian Culture*.

Salvatore d'Onofrio is quoted from my interview with him in November 2019.

Capaccio is quoted in Clovis Whitfield and Jane Martineau's *Painting in Naples, 1605–1705*, p. 28 ('I see in every street'; 'There is nobody who does not desire'; 'Nowhere in the world').

James Howell's 'a paradise peepled by devils' is from the *Parthanopoeia*, p. 2.

George Sandys ('Africa furnisheth them') is quoted in *Caravaggio* by Andrew Graham-Dixon (digital edition).

Marino is quoted in Astarita's *A Companion to Early Modern Naples*, p. 439 ('that golden sea'), *Adonis: Selection from L'Adone of Giambattista Marino*, p. xv ('so beastly elephantine') and Jordan Lancaster, *Shadow of Vesuvius*, p. 112 ('beautiful Adriana').

The quotes about the Locanda del Cerriglio are from Carmela Scala et al., *Corporeality and Performativity in Baroque Naples*, p. 116 ('the funhouse . . . where laughter abounds') and the Locanda menu ('at one table you saw' – Salvatore di Giannino – my translation).

Adriana was known as 'la bella Adriana' according to Lancaster, *Shadow of Vesuvius*, p. 111. The quotes from Monteverdi are from *Letters of Monteverdi*, p. 77, 22 June 1611.

On the female presence in seventeenth-century Naples, see Elisa Nova Chavarria in Astarita's *Companion to Early Modern Naples*: 'The female presence in the life of the great capital was indeed pervasive', p. 178.

Basile on court life ('Just look at those who serve in the courts') is from *La Vaiasseide*, quoted in *Tale of Tales*, p. xxxviii. The quotes from his letters are from the Croce edition of *Lo cunto de li cunti*. I am grateful to Nancy Canepa for translating these excerpts for me.

Bisaccioni is quoted in *I Caracciolo* by Gerard Pescatore, p. 56 ('so quick in prose and verse' – my translation). I am grateful to Professor Fiorentino Vecchiarelli of the Accademia dei Dogliosi for the gift of this book.

I have quoted from Peter Robb's *Street Fight in Naples*, p. 470 ('the monsters were the dirty rural poor').

Donato Cascione is quoted from my interview with him in Matera, November 2019.

Domenico Rea ('Basile appears to be telling fairy tales') is from Astarita, *Companion to Early Modern Naples*, p. 443.

Hans Christian Andersen is quoted from his *Diaries*, p. 73 ('I heard all of a sudden').

The account of Giambattista Basile's death ('the scourges of the conflagration') is from Aggiunta Bucca, February 1632, quoted in *The Pentamerone of Basile*, ed. Croce and Penzer, p. xxx. The lines from Giambattista's late verse ('the harsh disaster of Vesuvius' – my translation) are from the same book (Croce and Penzer), p. xxiix.

On the reception of the *Tales*: 'received with great applause' is from Croce and Penzer, p. xlvii; I have quoted from Suzanne Magnanini's *Postulated Routes from Naples to Paris*, p. 84 ('this little book') and Wilhelm Grimm in *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, translated by Jack Zipes, p. 8 ('a work as well-known'). The Grimms on 'Basile's collection with its rich contents' is from the preface to the second edition of the *Kinder und Hausmärchen*, part 2, pp. 237–8.

Galiani on the *Tales* as 'dull, monstrous and obscene' is from Carmela Scala's *Fairy Tales – A World between the Imaginary*, p. 8.

'The earliest European Cinderella' is from *The Cinderella Story: The Origins and Variations of the Story known as 'Cinderella'* by Neil Philip, p. 7.

I have quoted Nancy Canepa ('it's one of the tales') from my interview with her in July 2020.

Part Two: An Accidental Storyteller

The key texts for this section were *D'Alep à Paris: Les pérégrinations d'un jeune Syrien au temps de Louis XIV* (published by Actes Sud, 2015) and the tales narrated by Hanna. His memoir was discovered, astonishingly, by the scholar Jérôme Lentin in the Vatican Archives. My quote from Lentin is from an email correspondence in December 2020. The original transcripts for the tales, as written down by Antoine Galland, were published in *Marvels and Tales* by Wayne State University Press, vol. 32, no. 1 (Spring 2018).

I have quoted from the story of 'The City of Gold': 'the third prince', 'open', 'lively', p. 141 (*Marvels and Tales*).

Hanna's memoir, published as *D'Alep à Paris*, was translated into French, but at the time of writing no English translation was available. I have translated the excerpts myself. I am grateful to Marine Boussac-Maltby for corrections and advice on my translations. These are the quotes I have used: 'like a poet launching a satire', p. 59; 'like a vendor of citrus fruits', p. 55; 'extremely able in medical science', p. 106; 'to explore the world', p. 69; 'If you come with me', p. 70; 'Go around the tomb', p. 72; 'Does everything that I have seen and heard', p. 263; 'This magnificent town is nearly as important', p. 251; 'the grotto of the dragon', p. 79; 'a crystal bottle', p. 231; 'Do you not know that I have been sent', p. 192; 'I'm the king on my ship', p. 192; 'call of nature', p. 242; 'a palace without equal', p. 272; 'a solid and luxurious building', p. 258; 'I saw things that defy all description', p. 173; 'with glass windows', p. 173; 'followers as beautiful as stars', p. 264; 'which ravished the eyes', p. 284; 'Ah! What to say of the city of Paris', p. 256; 'excellent organisation of the hospital', p. 288; 'one finds in the city of Paris', p. 309; 'in this city there are a lot of sinful girls', p. 309; 'detestable spectacle', p. 323; 'mothers were found dead', p. 330; 'I became like a statue', p. 331; 'in this time my soul was choked', p. 334; 'he promised me', p. 334; 'a prince, counted among the dignitaries', p. 334; 'coins and ancient figures,' p. 335; 'which will recommend you to ambassadors', p. 336; 'If you come back safe and sound', p. 336; 'This fright had marked me', p. 345; 'Are you not satisfied in your life with me?', p. 345; 'You sons of the Orient', p. 346; 'you will repent of this later', p. 346; 'a letter of reproach', p. 352; 'It is the old man who you visited', p. 352; 'the lair of a band of thieves', p. 396; 'a bed as comfortable as possible', p. 434; 'Why did you not', p. 353; 'Destiny wished that I voyage with him', p. 433; 'We were astonished by the effects of this stone', p. 354; 'Be patient, let's take a few more steps', p. 438.

Henry Maundrell described the landscape around Keftine in *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter A.D. 1697* (the quotes are from pp. 2 and 3).

Russell's description of Aleppo is from *The Natural History of Aleppo*. I have quoted from p. 14 ('The mosques, the minarets and numerous cupolas'; 'the ideas of splendour') and p. 148 ('by combining the incidents'). I have quoted Ibn Jubayr ('of rare beauty') from p. 170 of *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr.* My own experience of Aleppo was described in *The Prester Quest* (pp. 146–54). Charles Robson is quoted in 'The English Chaplains at Aleppo' by Simon Mills, p. 13 ('an Epitome of the whole world').

On Versailles, I have quoted from Kisluk-Grosheide and Rondot's *Visitors to Versailles* ('impossible to leave one's apartment,' p. 111; 'All the accounts which I had formerly read', p. 21) and *Marvellous Thieves* by Paulo Lemos Horta ('wonder of the world', p. 49). *Marvellous Thieves* was a stimulating read, suggesting many sources as well as the details about Pierre Dipy on p. 84.

'Paris, it's the world' is from Marivaux, *La Méprise*, scene xiii, in *Œuvres complètes.*

'Never in my life have I seen' is from the Duchess of Orléans in 'Winter is Coming: Europe's Deep Freeze of 1709', *National Geographic History Magazine* (Jan./Feb. 2017).

I have quoted Antoine Galland from his diary, *Journal Parisien d'Antoine Galland (1708–15)*: 'I went this morning to the home of Monsieur Paul Lucas' (17 March 1709); 'a carnelian of a reasonable size' (18 March 1709); 'From yesterday, I have started', (3 November 1710); 'I finished the translation', (10 January 1711)*;* 'Three or four days ago', (13 October 1707).

Galland's comment 'stories just as good' is from a letter to Pierre-Daniel Huet dated 25 February 1701, quoted in *The Thousand and One Nights*, ed. Muhsin Mahdi, p. 19; his comment, 'well received at the court' is in *Antoine Galland* by Abdel-Halim, p. 108. 'He hopes to have the chair of the Arabic language' is from *Galland* by Abdel-Halim, p. 115; 'The Stratagems of Morgiana; or the Forty Thieves exterminated by the cunning of a slave' is from *Galland* by Abdel-Halim, p. 454.

The quote from Crébillon *fils* is from *The Sofa*, trans. Dobrée ('Do you suppose that', p. 15). 'No more from China, china bring' is quoted in Witchard's *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie*, chapter 3. 'Aladdin is the point of departure': George Brandes is quoted in Oxfeldt, *Nordic Orientalism*, p. 21.

I interviewed Hanan al-Shaykh in November 2020 and Chirine el-Ansari in November 2019.

'Ever since you began telling us tales from the Thousand and One Nights' is from *This Blinding Absence of Light*, p. 76.

Part Three: Of Shrews and Salons

I have quoted from Brian Stableford's 2017 translation of 'Beauty and the Beast', published by Black Coat Press (alongside Stableford's translation of 'The Naiads'), which I would recommend to readers for its faithfulness to Gabrielle-Suzanne's original.

These are the quotes I have used: 'Charming Beauty, don't regret', p. 40; 'There would be talk', p. 135; 'taste for luxury', p. 18; 'frightful poverty', p. 13; 'memory of their early years', p. 15; 'with time and courage', p. 95; 'surprised' when 'she opened a door', p. 45; 'rows of extremely tall orange-trees', p. 20; 'countless fountains', p. 44; 'hall of mirrors', p. 41; 'a numerous troop of monkeys,' p. 46; 'How much time she spent admiring him!', p. 44; 'the pleasure of dreaming of her attractive lover', p. 47; 'did not fear scandalizing anyone', p. 76; 'great liking for reading' p. 42; 'do you think that Princesses who are only so by the caprice of fortune', p. 80.

Other quotes from Gabrielle-Suzanne are as follows. I have quoted from 'Time and Patience' ('eternal slavery', p. 95; 'I can say that in general Time and Patience are the masters of all', pp. 46–57). I have quoted from *The Naiads* (trans. Stableford): 'It is Destiny', p. 163. I have quoted from *The Gardener of Vincennes*, p. 7 ('I was a little astonished'), p. 15 ('with so many charms') and the preface, p. iiii ('the fortune that my previous works have had'); from *The Conjugal Phoenix*, in Gallica Online ('so nasty and humid', p. 13; 'as much as this information would have flattered certain women', p. 39); 'the most beautiful little dog' is in *La Jeune Américaine*, p. 697; 'the fortune to please' is from *Anecdotes de la Court d'Alphonse*, *avertisement*, iv; 'my self-respect and my book-seller' is from the same book, p. i.

From the Baroness d'Aulnoy, I have quoted from *Fairy Tales of the Countess d'Aulnoy*, trans. J. R. Planché: 'all the sense and delicacy', pp. 212–21; 'It was then admitted that persons', p. 222.

On critiques of Gabrielle-Suzanne de Villeneuve, I have quoted from Bonnel and Rubinger, *Femmes Savantes et Femmes d'Esprit* ('that old shrew', p. 107); *Literary History of French Women*, vol. 4 ('She had a very great facility for making mediocrities', p. 263); and *La Jeune Américaine*, ed. Biancardi ('the most common details', p. 34).

On the salons, I have quoted from Benedetta Craveri's *The Age of Conversation* ('the problem of happiness', 'the rejection of injustices', p. 270; 'The learned brought knowledge and enlightenment', p. 263). I have quoted 'the adventures should always counter plausibility' from Stableford's introduction to *Tales of Enchantment and Disenchantment*, p. 15; 'have been the death of us for the last year or so', from the Abbé de Villiers, *Entretiens sur les contes de fées*, p.

69; ‘shocking practices and beliefs’ is from *A Trip to the Country*, p. 7; ‘in the midst of the noise’ is from Seifert and Stanton, *Enchanted Eloquence*, p. 11; ‘a tale similar to those of fairies’, is from Stableford’s introduction to *Tales of Enchantment and Disenchantment*, p. 14; ‘the passion that I have had for you’ is from the *Memoires de la cour de France*, p. 100.

On Gabrielle-Suzanne’s financial circumstances, I have quoted from Bonnel and Rubinger, *Femmes Savantes et Femmes d’Esprit*: ‘dissipated the greater part’, p. 103; ‘contracted as many debts’, p. 104; *La Jeune Américaine*, ed. Biancardi (‘a succession of sales’, p. 30); ‘sought to gain by her pen’ is from La Porte, *Histoire Littéraire des femmes françoises*, vol. 4, p. 188.

I have quoted from the *Chronique scandaleuse de Paris: Histoire des mauvais lieux*, p. 48 (‘carried the most shameful and dirtiest names’).

On Crébillon, I have quoted from Carlson, *Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century* (‘Corneille took heaven’, p. 70) and from LeClerc, *Voltaire and Crébillon père* (‘the work of a Vandal’, p. 140; ‘Crébillon the barbarian’, p. 86; ‘the biggest nose and the most malignantly fervent eyes’, p. 28). Casanova is quoted from Casanova’s memoirs, *Histoire de ma vie*, chapter 6; ‘Because I know men’ and ‘among the affinities’ are from *La Jeune Américaine*, ed. Biancardi, p. 32; ‘without manners’ is from *Journal de Collé*, vol. 1, p. 5 (H. Bonhomme edition); ‘that one is the worst!’ is from Dutrait, *Crébillon: Étude sur la vie et le theatre*, pp. 54–61, and Voltaire on the ‘gouvernante’ is on p. 62; ‘the adventures to which that old shrew de Villeneuve’ is from Bonnel and Rubinger, *Femmes Savantes et Femmes d’Esprit*, p .107.

Crébillon *fils* is quoted from *Poetry and Poets*, p. 21 (‘I cannot deny that I parted from Raton’).

I have quoted *La Jeune Américaine*, ed. Biancardi, for ‘several beautiful tracts’, p. 824.

On the Stockholm syndrome debate, I have quoted Zoe Williams in the *Guardian*, 19 March 2017, and Emma Watson in *Entertainment Weekly*, 16 February 2017, ew.com/movies/2017/ . . . The quote from *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is from the Kindle edition, pp. 33 and 246.

‘[T]he plots of both long works’ is from an email correspondence with Brian Stableford, May 2020.

I have quoted the actor/playwright Thierry Vincent from my interview with him in Nice, February 2020.

On the reception of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, I have quoted Devaux and Graffigny from Biancardi’s introduction to *La Jeune Américaine*: ‘a dreadful fairy tale’, p. 50; ‘Everyone is accusing Crébillon’, p. 51; ‘famous for so many fortunate works’, p. 42.

‘In commerce with many learned people’ is from Lacroix, *Dictionnaire portatif des femmes célèbres*, vol. 2, p. 724.

Cocteau is quoted from his *Diary of a Film* (‘Five years of shame’, p. 90; ‘A ferocious beast’, p. 104).

La Porte is quoted (‘Madame de Beaumont only abridged’) from *Histoire littéraire des femmes françoises*, vol. 4, p. 375.

Madame de Beaumont is quoted from *La Jeune Américaine*, ed. Biancardi: ‘Justice has not been done’, p. 12.

Planché (‘Madame de Beaumont has merely the merit’) is quoted from *Four and Twenty Fairy Tales*, pp. 534–5.

Stableford (‘a pioneer who lay groundwork’) is quoted from the *New York Review of Science Fiction*, no. 337 (Sept. 2016).

On Gabrielle-Suzanne being sidelined, I have quoted *The Meanings of Beauty and the Beast* (‘definitive’, p. 27), Tatar, *Hard Facts of the Brothers Grimm* (‘puffed up the story’, p. 27) and Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (‘founding text’, p. 290).

Part Four: The Girl from the Golden Sun

I would recommend *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes, for readers who wish to enjoy the Grimms' stories as close as possible to the original texts. From this edition I have used the following quotes: 'As she began to sing', p. 185; 'Aside from a few exceptions', p. 4; 'are becoming more and more scarce', p. 4; 'collected from oral traditions', p. 4; 'We have tried to grasp', p. 9; 'whoever sought to go back', p. 343; 'little house made of bread', p. 46. I have also quoted from *The Original 1812 Grimm Fairy Tales* ('Once there was a shoemaker', p. 195; 'the golden hairs', p. 333; 'we must all die', p. 75; 'whether it be fat enough', p. 80), and details of the sources come from this text: 'garden-house', for example, is p. 140: 'Told by Dortchen Wild in Kassel, January 19, 1812 by the oven in the garden house'. Other quotes from the *Handexemplar* – 'in the summer-house', 'in the garden' – are from Crane, 'External History of the *Kinder und Hausmärchen* of the Brothers Grimm', p. 142.

The most crucial source for details of Dortchen's life is her *Erinnerungen* ('Reminiscences'), published in the *Brüder Grimm Gedenken 2003* (pp. 1–15), edited by Heinz Rölleke; these are the memories dictated by Dortchen to her daughter Auguste, subtitled 'What dear mama told me about herself'. I translated these myself from the German, and am grateful to Gerlinde Schermer-Rauwolf for checking and correcting my work. I have used the following quotes from the *Erinnerungen*: 'trum-trum-trum', p. 8; 'I want to stab that swine!', p. 5; 'Watch out farmer', p. 8; 'mild, cheerful', p. 4; 'often grumpy', p. 4; 'bad weather', p. 4; 'he didn't want to know about them', p. 7; 'the old woman was so indescribably happy', p. 10; 'we are always the earliest up', p. 154; 'my greatest joy', p. 151; 'the poor men work', p. 154; 'the most splendid artificial things', p. 9.

Quotes from letters in the *Brüder Grimm Gedenken 2003* include 'Gifted with a rare grace', p. 162; and Jacob as a 'worker bee', p. 154.

On Dortchen's character, I have quoted Wilhelm Grimm in *Briefwechsel zwischen Jenny von Droste-Hulshoff und Wilhelm Grimm* ('a pure, loving heart'), letter from 3 September, 1826; and from the appendix to Ludwig Grimm's *Errinerungen aus meinem Leben* (p. 238): 'She is warm, natural, intelligent'; 'I have never ceased to be grateful'.

Other quotes from the Grimms include, from Jacob's *Selbstbiographie*: 'despite all the promises', p. 26; 'The whole instruction of the Royal Cabinet secretary', p. 30; and from Ludwig's *Reminiscences*: 'approached the Grimm siblings', p. 577; 'with her sensible nature', p. 577.

I have quoted Herman Grimm from *Deutsche Rundschau*, 1895, p. 97 (in Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales and Society*, p. 290): 'many hallways, stairways'; 'capacity of imparting'; and his account of his mother's death is quoted in Ludwig's *Errinerungen*, p. 578: 'Yesterday at one o'clock'.

Napoleon as the 'Great Ogre' is a common term. See for example *Evening Standard*, 19 May 2016: *Napoleon's Last Island* by Thomas Keneally, reviewed by Nick Curtis.

The detail about the army lottery ('free number') is from Paradiz, *Clever Maids*, p. 55.

Among many studies of the Grimms, I consulted *The Owl, the Raven, and the Dove* by G. Ronald Murphy: 'Many nights I spent sleepless', p. 35.

Paths through the Forest by Murray B. Peppard: 'Those days of the collapse', p. 30.

The Brothers Grimm by Jack Zipes: 'A society has been founded', p. 26; 'When you left, I thought my heart', p. 6; 'the constant fierce pains', p. 14. I have also quoted from Zipes's *Happily Ever After*, p. 43: 'an oral tale' (on 'Hansel and Gretel'); and I have quoted Zipes ('you can really hear') from my interview with him in December 2020.

'Sonntags vom Dortchen' by Heinz Rölleke: 'that you show nobody', p. 126; 'From her the first volume', p. 129; 'The intention of this new formulation', p. 145; 'I have so much love', p. 125; 'Everybody wonders about our household', p. 127. I have quoted from Bottigheimer, *Fairy*

Tales and Society: ‘has something quite charming’, p. 297; and from Tatar, *Hard Facts of the Brothers Grimm*: ‘to salvage what was left’, p. 11; ‘the most pathetic’, p. 16; ‘real junk’, p. 16. I have quoted from Crane, ‘External History of the *Kinder und Hausmärchen* of the Brothers Grimm’: ‘She preserves the old traditions’, p. 148; ‘negligent and slovenly’, Clemens Brentano, p. 151; ‘Never, my dear Wilhelm’, p. 138.

On the creation of ‘Hansel and Gretel’, I have quoted from ‘On the Origin of Hansel and Gretel’ by Willem de Blécourt: ‘the influence of Marie Hassenpflug’, p. 39; ‘The house of bread’, p. 39; ‘Far from labouring’, p. 43.

I have quoted Ludwig Hassenpflug – ‘We always met . . . very cheerful evenings’ – from *Mein Leben bis zum Regierungsantritt des Kurfürsten Wilhelm II*, p. 186 (in Bottigheimer, *Fairy Tales and Society*, p. 296).

Quotes from Kate Forsyth are from my interview with her in May 2020.

Quotes from Zechmeister’s play are from *Einer Muss Heiraten*, p. 7.

Giambattista Basile is quoted from *Tale of Tales*, trans. Canepa, p. 439: ‘I didn’t bring’.

On witch persecutions, I have quoted from Midelfort, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany 1562–1684*, p. 59: ‘If the witches are not burned’; from *Witch Craze* by Lyndal Roper: on the trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in south-west Germany, such as that of Margarethe Mindlerin in 1598, p. 74; ‘Gretel thinks she will be eaten’, p. 247; and from *Simplicissimus*, trans. Mike Mitchell, ‘as if they were extracting’, p. 26.

Part Five: The Rise and Fall of Ivan the Fool

The primary source on Ivan Khudiakov’s life is his memoir, which was translated into French and published as *Mmoires d’un révolutionnaire* (1889). There is very little information about Ivan available in English, aside from a brief biographical note and three stories translated by Sibelan Forrester in Chandler and Chandler (eds), *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*. On the other hand, there is a lot of information available in Russian, including a biography by V. Elenskaia (published 1969) as well as numerous articles and a detailed ‘Introductory Essay’ to *Velikorusskie Skazki* (1964 edition) by Professor Bazanov. I have mostly depended on the 1964 edition for Ivan’s stories, apart from the tale of ‘The Stepdaughter and the Stepmother’s Daughter’, which I have adapted from Forrester’s translation in *Russian Magic Tales*. I am grateful to Marina Skalova for checking through my translations from the Russian and helping me with corrections.

From Ivan’s memoir, I have quoted the following: ‘I was not a hero’, p. 199; ‘a glowing halo’, p. 20; ‘always the first in my class’, p. 21; ‘figured constantly on the roll’, p. 21; ‘owing to the laziness’, p. 22; ‘completely drunk’, p. 16; ‘distinguished himself above all by his rudeness’, p. 17; ‘myths and popular tales’, p. 35; ‘and at last I resolved to go and seek’, p. 35; ‘It is difficult to figure people more laborious’, p. 113; ‘Can it be that’, p. 113; ‘It is useless to say that, in such circumstances’, p. 114; ‘magician’, p. 114; ‘Converted by force’, pp. 114–15; ‘The natives saw the disappearance’, p. 115; ‘It was a truly grand sum’, p. 56; ‘a certain literary notoriety’, p. 58; ‘an intellectual police tribunal’, p. 41; ‘Here is the conclusion at which’, pp. 51–2; ‘the police on horseback seized students’, p. 72; ‘Censorship has always been’, p. 106; ‘the new ideas were boldly professed’, p. 92; ‘I arrived there relatively rich’, p. 85. ‘It is difficult to imagine’, p. 85; ‘The secretary made a report’, p. 87; ‘It is materialistic’, p. 106; ‘But please tell me, are you occupying yourself’, p. 88; ‘Imagine a young’, pp. 118–19; ‘Are you the one who’s brought out a book?’, p. 119; ‘My love began’, p. 120; ‘The soirées of the Lebedev sisters’, p. 120; ‘the warm, dark night’, p. 124; ‘carried away’, pp. 125–6; ‘Is this possible? When Baron B’, p. 132; ‘It needs no more than a denunciation’, p. 133; ‘my love, I can say’, p. 134; ‘capricious’, p. 142;

‘she committed the most unpardonable errors’, p. 134; ‘she could not endure’, p. 134; ‘all her forces were concentrated on’, p. 136; ‘a month of such a love’, p. 143; ‘It astonishes me’, p. 144; ‘extraordinary contrast’, p. 143; ‘I am so unhappy’, p. 145; ‘all that was good in her’, p. 146; ‘in every individual’, p. 142; ‘I resolved to come back’, p. 146; ‘the richest and most civilised’, p. 149; ‘A group of young people’, p. 153; ‘Already, at the end of November’, p. 166; ‘This one particularly interested me’, p. 168; ‘financial distress’, p. 182; ‘I am come to your home’, p. 183; ‘found nothing compromising’, p. 186; ‘food that dog’s wouldn’t want to eat’, p. 200; ‘Did you direct the coup?’, p. 196; ‘Your book has been forbidden’, p. 186; ‘Muraviev believes in your guilt’, p. 195; ‘a veritable flood of accusations’, p. 192; ‘that I had always’, p. 193; ‘revolutionary’, p. 241; ‘The position of all men fallen’, p. 199; ‘I was not a hero’, p. 199; ‘condemned to serve as food for lice’, p. 200; ‘he displayed the greatest passion’, p. 241; ‘So this is the transportation’, p. 266; ‘the meanest rooms’, p. 274; ‘If they starve’, p. 278; ‘a sort of hero’, p. 287; ‘worse than forced labour’, p. 288; ‘Few of my readers’, p. 288; ‘the furthest places in Siberia’, p. 253; ‘To live with the cows’, p. 289.

Other quotes from Ivan are from the prefatory note to his *Collected Tales* (‘the insignificant omissions there turned out to be’); and ‘All of them were recorded’ is in *Velikorusskie Skazki*. ‘We certainly don’t want to say that’ is from V. Bazanov’s ‘Introductory Essay’, p. 13; ‘recorded by me from a native of the village of Selina,’ is from *Velikorusskie Skazki*, p. 7.

Quotes from the tales include the following from Chandler and Chandler’s *Russian Magic Tales*: ‘Fie, I can smell a Russian soul’, p. 88; ‘a little house on chicken legs’, p. 88; ‘Fie, fie, fie!’, p. 88; ‘if people are too inquisitive, I eat them’, p. 43. ‘I was there, / I drank honey-beer’ is from *Collected Tales*, p. 84.

Other accounts of Ivan include German Lopatin’s obituary from *Vpered*, no. 15 (Dec. 1876), printed in *Memoires d’un révolutionnaire*: ‘a man of small height’, p. 291; ‘All the people who taught’, p. 294.

Secondary accounts of the turmoil of 1860s Russia include Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*: ‘at a time when blood’, p. 149.

Pushkin (‘A hut stands there on chicken legs’) is quoted from Johns, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale*, p. 1.

There is a detailed account of Afanas’ev in Davidson and Chaudhri’s *Companion to the Fairy Tale*. I have quoted the following: ‘I haven’t the time to publish them myself’, ‘the accused civil servant’, ‘Books once nourished me’ and ‘a mild lung disorder’, p. 222.

Turgenev is quoted (‘not long ago A. N. Afanas’ev died’) from Haney (ed.), *Complete Folktales of Afanas’ev*.

On Russia’s ‘two capitals’ see, for example, *The Globalist*, 14 November 2001: ‘Russia – a Tale of Two Capitals’; ‘the two capitals’ is also a phrase used in Ivan’s *Memoires d’un révolutionnaire* (see p. 213).

I have quoted Robert Chandler – ‘the novel getting going’ – from a telephone interview on 16 November 2020; and Roman Jakobson (‘the appearance of’) from *Russian Fairy Tales*, p. 637.

The ‘Age of Great Reform’ is from Verhoeven, *The Odd Man Karakozov*, p. 10. The quote from Anna Karenina (‘that of late years’) is from the Wordsworth Classics edition, p. 481. ‘Alexander the Liberator’ is from Vilenskaia, *Khudiakov*, p. 102.

On censorship, I have quoted from Vilenskaia, *Khudiakov* (‘some circumstances do not allow us to print’), p. 39; Chandler and Chandler (eds), *Russian Magic Tales* (‘slashed and crimsoned’), p. 28; and from Sibelan Forrester (‘Everything was censored’) from email correspondence in November 2020 (as is the comment ‘if we could trace’).

Dostoyevsky (‘a fantastic vision of fairyland’) is from Figes, *Natasha’s Dance*, p. 161.

On Herzen (‘lives like a gentleman’), I have quoted from Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, p. 342; ‘on Ishutin and his friends’ is from Gleason, *Young Russia: The Genesis of Russian Radicalism in the 1860s*, p. 317.

A detailed account of Count Muraviev's critique of Ivan's work is given in Bazanov's 'Introductory Essay' to *Velikorusskie Skazki*: 'overthrowing the existing order', p. 31; 'libraries that were supposed to open', p. 31; 'which sets out a comparison', in *Collected Tales*, p. 36; 'contrary to scripture', p. 35; 'ridicule of religion', p. 36; 'desire to present', p. 36; 'capable of producing', p. 36.

Ishutin on 'foolish talk' is from Ulam, *Prophets and Conspirators*, p. 159.

Karakozov ('I read many books') is quoted from Verhoeven, 'Time of Terror, Terror of Time', p. 257; and the brief dialogue between Karakozov and Tsar Alexander ('What do you want?') is from *Angel of Vengeance* by Ana Siljak, p. 79.

Karakozov's proclamation ('I have long been tormented') is from his manifesto to 'Friends-Workers', in Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*, p. 347.

'I left, one foot' (Basile) is from *Tale of Tales*, ed. Canepa, p. 456.

Napoleon's comment ('Scratch a Russian') is from Figes, *Natasha's Dance*, p. 361.

Propp on 'Khudiakov was interested in folklore' is from *The Russian Folktale*, p. 55; 'the first major collection taken straight from the people's mouth' is from p. 57.

On the trial, I have quoted from Verhoeven, *Odd Man Karakozov*: 'well known for his malicious teachings', p. 21; 'Commitment to the protection of the Russian people', p. 10; 'Every day news arrived' (Eliseev), p. 17; 'Terrorism virtually emerged from the Russian autocracy's mishandling', p. 10. I have also quoted from Bazanov's 'Introductory Essay' in *Velikorusskie Skazki*: 'incomparably more important', p. 7; 'a man of an extremely socialist direction', p. 22.

On Ivan's exile, I have quoted from Vilenskaia, *Khudiakov*: 'Khudiakov was cheerful', p. 131; 'he suddenly became taciturn', p. 138; 'mild insanity', p. 140; 'loosening suspicion over', p. 140; 'Khudiakov's mental capacity', p. 140; 'he starts without any reason', p. 141; 'the appearance of a primitive creature', p. 142.

On Ivan's research into the Yakuti epic, I have quoted from Bazanov's 'Introductory Essay' in *Velikorusskie Skazki*: 'Say-sing a tale', p. 46; 'ever more vividly', p. 48; 'sang and spoke', p. 48.

I have quoted Lopatin from Bazanov's 'Introductory Essay': 'It is clear that these lessons', p. 31. The praise of Ivan from the Geographical Society ('This commission was fulfilled') is from Bazanov's 'Introductory Essay', p. 10.

For more about Olga Ozarovskaya and Nikolai Onchukov, see Chandler and Chandler (eds), *Russian Magic Tales.*

Part Six: A Valley Haunted by Demons

The Ocean of the Streams of Story was translated in its entirety from the original Sanskrit into English by C. H. Tawney, published in 1880 and re-published, edited by N. M. Penzer, in 1924-8. There is a more recent, abridged translation by Arshia Sattar (published by Penguin in 1994). I have consulted both these translations, and would recommend them to interested readers.

I have used the following quotes from Tawney's translation (1880 edition): 'I have not made', p. 2; 'the book is precisely on the model', p. 2; 'the land which was hallowed', p. 356; 'fierce elephant', p. 590; 'Your reputation for vice', p. 68; 'the only thing that is stable', p. 29; 'we worship Shiva', p. 133; 'splendid Buddhist temples', p. 236; 'Religion is not confined', p. 236; 'that great poet', p. 47; 'is barbarous', p. 48; 'breasts like clusters', p. 315; 'A lovely one will sweep', p. 238; 'who seem to have been formed', p. 194; 'a prince distracted', p. 288; 'leapt into that burning pyre', p. 523; 'these first twenty-four questions', p. 359; 'Whoever reads this tale', p. 625.

Several quotations come from Somadeva's terminal essay, printed in volume 9 of Penzer's edition of *The Ocean of the Streams of Story*: 'In order to interest', p. 88; 'the blest Ananta', p.

87; ‘Now this moon of kings’, p. 87; ‘The Kashmiris were adorned’, p. 87.

The following quotes are from Sattar’s translation (*Tales from the Kathasaritsagara*): ‘Those who drink’, p. 50; ‘knows all the sciences’, p. 149; ‘this text is concerned’, p. xv; ‘people who fill their heads’, p. 34; ‘because I keep in touch’, p. 194.

Theodore Benfey (‘a great number of folk tales’) is quoted from *The Russian Folktale* by Vladimir Propp, p. 107.

Penzer (‘Every stream of myth’) is quoted from Tawney, *The Ocean of the Streams of Story*, vol. 1, p. xx.

Lacôte’s *Essai sur Gunadhya et la Brhatkatha* is quoted from p. 130: ‘results in demonstrating the bad taste’.

Dandin called Paisacha ‘goblin language’: see Chattopadhyay, *Studies in the Kathasaritsagara*, p. xix.

I have quoted Gayathri Prabhu from my interview with her in May 2020.

Kshemendra is quoted from his *Three Satires from Ancient Kashmir*: ‘Kashmir is in the forefront’, p. 3.

Al-Biruni is quoted from *Alberuni’s India*: ‘They are particularly anxious’, p. 206.

‘So deeply is the author immersed’ is from Mohan, ‘Kashmir under the Loharas’, p. 15.

Kalhana’s *Rajatarangini* (*River of Kings*) is quoted from Jogesh Chunder Dutt’s translation: ‘a terror to his foes’, ‘moved over the battlefield’, ‘his body covered’, ‘milk-fomentation’, ‘the protector of the thieves’, p. 179; ‘most beloved’, p. 181; ‘From this time’, p. 182; ‘costly habits’, p. 178; ‘Gradually the simple king became henpecked’, p. 184; ‘These men of no real merit’, p. 188; ‘repented’, p. 185; ‘set up a Shiva’, p. 181; ‘was indiscriminate’, p. 188; ‘Always knocking about from house to house’, p. 189; ‘Have I not lost glory’, p. 199; ‘You have abused me’, p. 200; ‘Relieved of the tyranny of his wife and son’, p. 201; ‘so bright that it reflected’, p. 202; ‘And thus having established her fame’, p. 202.

I have quoted Arshia Sattar (‘Hinduism is only one among many rivers’) from my email correspondence with her in January 2021.

Burt is quoted (‘the sculptor had at times’) from volume 8 of the Calcutta *Journal of the Asiatic Society* (March 1839).

The quote from Dr Know-All (‘poor Crab!’) is from *Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, ed. Zipes, p. 330.

Wilhelm Grimm (‘we may dare to follow’) is from *Altdanische Heldenslieder*, 1811, foreword, p. v (cited in *Fairy Tales and Society*, p. 298).

Part Seven: A Heart too Warm for Ice

There are many translations of Hans Christian Andersen’s tales. I have used *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*, trans. Erik Christian Haugaard. For primary sources on his life, I have consulted numerous books, including *The Fairy Tale of My Life* and Hans’s *Diaries.*

The following quotations are taken from *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories*: ‘the world above’, p. 58; ‘All right, we will start’, p. 234; ‘A soldier came marching’, p. 1; ‘that are continually opening and closing’, p. 57; ‘their branches and leaves’, p. 58; ‘always changing, ever’, p. 124; ‘In 1831, during a journey to Hartzen’, p. 1071; ‘came to me during a visit’, p. 1072; ‘they had grown’, p. 262; ‘carried him where his legs refused to go’, p. 1053; ‘one of my best stories’, p. 1096; ‘I have now lived to be an old man’ (in ‘Notes for my Fairy Tales and Stories’, 1874), p. 1096.

The quote from ‘The Tallow Candle’ (‘had found its place in life’) is from Lars Bjørnsten’s translation on the website H. C. Andersen Information, www.hcandersen-homepage.dk

(28.3.2013).

The following quotations are from *The Fairy Tale of My Life*: ‘My life is a wondrous fairy tale’, p. 13; ‘The home where I spent my childhood’, p. 13; ‘I talked about the heart and the kidneys’, p. 16; ‘I remembered the previous winter’, p. 23; ‘first you have to suffer’, pp. 35–41; ‘my strange gestures’, p. 33; ‘Several of my friends’, p. 199; ‘normally found in bed’, p. 170; ‘drank a glass of wine with me’, p. 269; ‘and most of them wanted’, p. 263; ‘From the kitchen, with the help of a ladder’, p. 13.

The following are quotations from Hans’s *Diaries*: ‘Küchler said he wanted’, p. 69; ‘shook me profoundly’, p. 69; ‘How close I was to ending’, p. 69; ‘it is going for me’, p. 15; ‘She sings German’, p. 151; ‘Haven’t heard anything from Jenny’, p. 153.

I have also quoted from *A Poet’s Bazaar*: ‘magnificent enchanted palaces’, p. 238.

Numerous biographies of Hans are available. I have quoted from Elias Bredsdorff’s groundbreaking *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Work*: ‘the poor washerwoman’s son’, p. 134; ‘a constant stream of letters’, p. 273; ‘very fond of reading’ (letter to Jonas Collin, March 1825), p. 19; ‘wise woman’, p. 22; ‘made some magic tricks’, p. 22; ‘It was as if I was sailing’, p. 28; ‘When at Frederiksberg’, p. 28; ‘a lanky boy’ (Edvard Collin), p. 84; ‘He is rather like’, p. 241; ‘I was in some way really afraid’, p. 70; ‘gained me respect’, p. 120; ‘will certainly not have any’, p. 124; ‘It is no empty convention’, p. 124; ‘Wherever I go’, p. 125; ‘I do like your fairy tales’ (Anna Marie Livingstone), p. 255; ‘The first ones I wrote’, p. 165; ‘I sit with my gaily coloured slippers’, p. 120; ‘asked me if I was mad’, p. 36; ‘that he could not stand me’, p. 70; ‘It seemed like a fairy tale’, p. 231; ‘pressed my hand’, p. 170; ‘sent Jenny a poem’, p. 163; ‘from America, Germany and England’, p. 273; ‘a decoration’, p. 273; ‘O Lord, Lord!’, p. 273; ‘he has been repeating’, p. 273; ‘Now the light has been extinguished’, p. 274.

I have quoted from Wullschlager’s *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller*: ‘succeeded in recovering’ (*English Daily News*), p. 425; ‘The history of my life’, p. 2; ‘I very seldom played’, p. 17; ‘I was always the first there’, p. 26; ‘I arrived with my small parcel’, p. 1; ‘the ugliest thing’ (Clara Schumann), p. 201; ‘struck, at the first moment’ (Edmund Gosse), p. 415; ‘I had no peace from the pimps’, p. 132 (21 Feb. 1834); ‘I long for you’, p. 155; ‘how diseased a mind he had’ (Edvard Collin), p. 164; ‘a visit from Scharff’ (Feb. 1862 diary); ‘joy, some kind of sexual fulfillment’, pp. 387–9; ‘glass mountains of fairy tale’, p. 123; ‘most decidedly disconcerting’, p. 346; ‘because I hope that my name’, p. 239; ‘I had the feeling that the earth was rotating’, p. 195; ‘It has been sheer joy for me’, p. 242; ‘so strangely tender’, p. 215; ‘No fairy tales occur to me any more’, p. 421; ‘drunk my chocolate’, p. 1; ‘he sat beside me’, p. 415.

I have quoted from Reginald Spink’s *Hans Christian Andersen and His World*: ‘to travel is to live’, p. 58; ‘Most of what I have written’, p. 70; ‘Every character is from life’, p. 70.

I have quoted from *Hans Christian Andersen: A New Life* by Jens Andersen: ‘my very softness’, p. 193; ‘erotic period’, pp. 475–6; ‘Well Andersen, move those long shanks’, p. 309.

Critics of Hans include John Goldthwaite in *The Natural History of Make Believe* (sentimental religiosity’, p. 64) and Sara Maitland in *Gossip from the Forest* (‘too pious, too complicated’, p. 13).

I have quoted from Bom, Bøggild and Johs (eds), *Hans Christian Andersen and Community*: ‘To think that I’, p. 132; ‘One has to bow’, p. 120.

The quotations from Dr Anne Klara Bom and Dr Ejnar Stig Askgaard are from my interviews with them in Odense in December 2019. I also interviewed Sakura Inoue and other members of the cast of *Snedronningen* (*The Snow Queen*) in Copenhagen on 18 December 2019.

For the Little Mermaid as a feminist leader, see *The Surface Breaks* by Louise O’Neill (Scholastic, 2018).

On the psychological meanings of ‘The Snow Queen’, I have quoted from Lederer’s *Kiss of the Snow Queen*: ‘above all, the story of the redemption’, p. 155; and from Binding, *Hans*

Christian Andersen: European Witness: ‘force the wind out of its cave’ and ‘what Andersen puts’, p. 235.

Bibliography

Abdel-Halim, Mohammed, *Antoine Galland: Sa vie et son œuvre* (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1964)

Afanas'ev, Aleksandr, *Russian Fairy Tales* (trans. Norbert Guterman) (New York: Pantheon Books, 1945)

Al-Biruni, *Alberuni's India* (ed. Edward C. Sachau) (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1910)

Andersen, Hans Christian, *A Poet's Bazaar* (trans. Charles Beckwith) (London: Richard Bentley, 1846)

——, *The Diaries of Hans Christian Andersen* (trans. Patricia L. Conroy and Sven H. Rossell) (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1900)

——, *The Fairy Tale of My Life* (trans. W. Glyn Jones) (New York: British Book Centre, 1955)

——, *The Complete Fairy Tales and Stories of Hans Christian Andersen* (trans. Erik Christian Haugaard) (London: Victor Gollancz, 1975)

Andersen, Jens, *Hans Christian Andersen: A New Life* (trans. Tiina Nunnally) (London: Duckworth, 2005)

Apuleius, *The Golden Ass* (trans. Robert Graves) (London: Penguin, 1950)

Astarita, Tommaso (ed.), *A Companion to Early Modern Naples* (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2013)

Aulnoy, Marie-Catherine d', *Memoires des avantures singulieres de la cour de France* (La Haye: Jean Alberts, 1692)

——, *Fairy Tales of the Countess d'Aulnoy* (trans. J. R. Planché) (London, 1855)

Basile, Giambattista, *Il Pentamerone del Cavalier Giovan Battista Basile overo Lo cunto de li cunti trattenemiento de li peccerille di Gian Alesio Abbattutis* (Naples: Presso Giuseppe-Maria Porcelli, 1788)

——, *The Pentamerone of Basile* (trans. from the Italian of Benedetto Croce and ed. N. M. Penzer) (London: John Lane, 1932)

——, *The Tale of Tales* (trans. Nancy Canepa) (New York: Penguin, 2016)

Ben Jalloun, Taher, *This Blinding Absence of Light* (London: Penguin, 2005)

Binding, Paul, *Hans Christian Andersen: European Witness* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014)

Blécourt, Willem de, 'On the Origin of Hansel and Gretel', *Fabula*, vol. 49 (April 2008), pp. 30–46

Bom, Anne Klara, Bøggild, Jacob, and Nørregaard Frandsen, Johs (eds), *Hans Christian Andersen and Community* (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2019)

Bonnel, Roland, and Rubinger, Catherine (eds), *Femmes Savantes et Femmes d'Esprit: Women Intellectuals of the French Eighteenth Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994)

Bottigheimer, Ruth (ed.), *Fairy Tales and Society: Illusion, Allusion, and Paradigm* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987)

Bredsdorff, Elias Lunn, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Story of His Life and Work* (London: Phaidon, 1975)

Brüder Grimm Gedenken 2003, vol. 15 (Stuttgart: S. Hirzel Verlag, 2003)

Campanella, *City of the Sun* (trans. Thomas W. Halliday) (London: Civitas Solis / Ideal Commonwealths, 1885)

Canepa, Nancy L., *From Court to Forest: Giambattista Basile's 'Lo cunto de li cunti' and the Birth of the Literary Fairy Tale* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1999)

Carlson, Marvin, *Voltaire and the Theatre of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Greenwood, 1998)

Casanova, Giacomo, *Casanova's Memoirs*, ed. Joseph Monet (London: W. H. Allen, 1953)

Chandler, Robert and Elizabeth (eds), *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012)

Chattopadhyay, Aparna, *Studies in the Kathasaritsagara* (Varanasi: A. Chattopadhyay, 1993)

Cocteau, Jean, *Beauty and the Beast: Diary of a Film* (trans. Ronald Duncan) (London: Dennis Dobson, 1950)

Crane, T. F., 'The External History of the *Kinder und Hausmärchen* of the Brothers Grimm', *Modern Philology*, vol. 14, no. 10, pp. 577–610 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1917)

Craveri, Benedetta, *The Age of Conversation* (trans. Theresa Waugh) (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005)

Crébillon, Claude Prosper, *The Sofa* (trans. Bonamy Dobrée) (London: Folio Society, 1951)

Davidson, Hilda Ellis, and Chaudhri, Anna (eds), *A Companion to the Fairy Tale* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003)

degli Innocenti, Luca et al. (eds), *Interactions between Orality and Writing in Early Modern Italian Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016)

Dutrait, Maurice, *Crébillon: Étude sur la vie et le théâtre* (Bordeaux, 1895)

Dyab, Hanna, *D'Alep à Paris: Les pérégrinations d'un jeune Syrien au temps de Louis XIV* (trans. and ed. Paule Fahmé-Thiéry, Bernard Heyberger and Jérôme Lentin) (Sindbad: Actes Sud, 2015)

Figes, Orlando, *Natasha's Dance* (London: Allen Lane, 2002)

Forsyth, Kate, *The Wild Girl* (London: Allison & Busby, 2013)

Gleason, Abbott, *Young Russia: The Genesis of Russian Radicalism in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983)

Goldthwaite, John, *The Natural History of Make Believe: A Guide to the Principal Works of Britain, Europe, and America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996)

Graham-Dixon, Andrew, *Caravaggio: A Life Sacred and Profane* (London: Penguin, 2011)

Grimm, Jacob, *Selbstbiographie* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag Klassik, 1984)

Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (trans. and ed. Jack Zipes) (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014)

Grimm, Ludwig, *Erringerungen aus meinem Leben* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1971)

Grimm, Wilhelm, *Briefwechsel zwischen Jenny von Droste-Hulshoff und Wilhelm Grimm* (Mu̇nster: Aschendorffsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1929)

Grimmelshausen, Johann, *Simplicissimus* (trans. Mike Mitchell) (Sawtry, Cambs: Dedalus Books, 1999)

Griswold, Jerome, *The Meanings of 'Beauty and the Beast': A Handbook* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2004)

Haney, Jack (trans. and ed.), *The Complete Folktales of A. N. Afanas'ev* (Jackson, MI: University Press of Mississippi, 2017)

Horta, Paulo Lemos, *Marvellous Thieves*: *Secret Authors of the Arabian Nights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017)

Hosking, Geoffrey A., *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917* (London: Fontana, 1998)

Howell, James, *Parthenopoeia, or the History of the Most Noble and Renowned Kingdom of Naples* (London: Scipione Mazzella, 1654)

Ibn Jubayr, *The Travels of Ibn Jubayr* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952)

Irwin, Robert, *The Arabian Nights: A Companion* (London: Allen Lane, 1994)

Johns, Andreas, *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004)

Kalhana, *Rajatarangini of Kalhana Pandita*, vol. 1 (trans. Jogesh Chunder Dutt) (London: Trubner & Co., 1887)

Kamenstsky, Christa, *The Brothers Grimm and Their Critics* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1992)

Khudiakov, Ivan, *Velikorusskie Skazki – Great Russian Fairy Tales* (ed. V. G. Bazanov and O. B. Alekseev) (Moscow and Leningrad: Nauka, 1964)

——, *Memoires d'un révolutionnaire* (Paris: Ancienne Maison Michel Lévy Frères, 1889)

Kisluk-Grosheide, Daniëlle, and Rondot, Bertrand, *Visitors to Versailles: From Louis XIV to the French Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018)

Kshemendra, *Three Satires from Ancient Kashmir* (trans. A. N. D. Haksar) (Haryana: Penguin India, 2011)

Lacôte, Felix, *Essai sur Gunadhya et la Brhatkatha* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1908)

Lacroix, Jean François de, *Dictionnaire portatif des femmes célèbres*, vol. 2 (Paris: Belin et Volland, 1788)

Lancaster, Jordan, *In the Shadow of Vesuvius*: *A Cultural History* (London: Tauris Parke, 2005)

La Porte, Joseph de, *Histoire littéraire des femmes françoises, ou lettres historiques et critiques*, vol. 4 (Paris: Chez Lacombe 1769)

LeClerc, Paul O., *Voltaire and Crébillon père: History of an Enmity* (Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, vol. 115) (Banbury: Voltaire Foundation, 1973)

Lederer, Wolfgang, *The Kiss of the Snow Queen: Hans Christian Andersen and Man's Redemption by Woman* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986)

Maas, Sarah J., *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015)

Magnanini, Suzanne, 'Postulated Routes from Naples to Paris: The Printer Antonio Bulifon and Giambattista Basile's Fairy Tales in Seventeenth-Century France', *Marvels & Tales*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 78–92 (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2007)

Magnus, Olaus, *The Description of the Northern Peoples* (trans. Peter Fisher and Humphrey Higgens) (London: Hakluyt Society, 1998)

Mahdi, Muhsin (ed.), *The Thousand and One Nights: From the Earliest Known Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 2014)

Maitland, Sara, *Gossip from the Forest*: *The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairy Tales* (London: Granta, 2012)

Marino, Giambattista, *Adonis: Selection from L'Adone of Giambattista Marino* (trans. Harold Martin Priest) (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967)

Marivaux, Pierre de, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Arvensa Editions, 2013)

Maundrell, Henry, *A Journey from Aleppo to Jerusalem at Easter A.D. 1697* (Oxford: printed at the Theatre, 1707)

Midelfort, H. C. Erik, *Witch Hunting in Southwestern Germany, 1562–1684* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1972)

Mills, Simon, 'The English Chaplains at Aleppo: Exploration and Scholarship between England and the Ottoman Empire, 1620–1760', *Bulletin of the Council for British Research in the Levant*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2011), pp. 13–20

Mohan, Krishna, 'Kashmir under the Loharas: AD 1003–1171', unpublished thesis, SOAS, University of London, 1958

Monteverdi, Claudio, *Letters of Monteverdi* (trans. and intro. Denis Stevens) (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995)

Murphy, G. Ronald, *The Owl, the Raven, and the Dove* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

Oxfeldt, Elisabeth, *Nordic Orientalism: Paris and the Cosmopolitan Imagination 1800–1900* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2005)

Paradiz, Valerie, *Clever Maids*: *The Secret History of the Grimm Fairy Tales* (New York: Basic Books, 2005)

Peppard, Murray B., *Paths through the Forest* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971)

Perrault, Charles, *The Complete Fairy Tales* (trans. Christopher Betts) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009)

Pescatore, Gerardo, *I Caracciolo: Storia dei Principi di Avellino* (Avellino: Accademia dei Dogliosi, 2007–8)

Philip, Neil, *The Cinderella Story: The Origins and Variations of the Story Known as 'Cinderella'* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989)

Planché, James (trans.), *Four and Twenty Fairy Tales* (London, 1858)

Propp, Vladimir, *The Russian Folktale* (ed. Sibelan Forrester) (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012)

Robb, Peter, *Street Fight in Naples: A City's Unseen History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011)

Rölleke, Heinz, 'Sonntags vom Dortchen', in *Über Nachtfliegen, Zaunkönige und Meisterdiebe* (ed. Erhardt, Holger et al.) (Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2019), pp. 125–48

——, 'Erinnerungen Dortchen Grimms in der Aufzeichnung ihrer Tochter Auguste', in *Brüder Grimm Gedenken 2003*, (Stuttgart: S. Hirzel Verlag, 2003), p. 115

Roper, Lyndal, *Witch Craze: Terror and Fantasy in Baroque Germany* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004)

Russell, Alexander, *The Natural History of Aleppo* (Farnborough: Gregg International, 1969)

Sauval, Henri, *La Chronique scandaleuse de Paris: Ou, Histoire des mauvais lieux* (Brussels: J. J. Gay, 1883)

Scala, Carmela Benardetta, *Fairy Tales – A World between the Imaginary: Metaphor at Play in 'Lo cunto de li cunti' by Giambattista Basile* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014)

Scala, Carmela Benedetta et al., *Corporeality and Performativity in Baroque Naples: The Body of Naples* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017)

Seifert, Lewis C., and Stanton, Donna C. (eds and trans.), *Enchanted Eloquence: Fairy Tales by Seventeenth-Century French Women Writers* (Toronto: Iter, 2010)

Siljak, Ana, *Angel of Vengeance: The 'Girl Assassin', the Governor of Saint-Petersburg, and Russia's Revolutionary World* (New York: St Martin's Press, 2008)

Somadeva, *The Katha Sarit Sagara, or Ocean of the Streams of Story* (trans. C. H. Tawney) (Calcutta: J. W. Thomas at the Baptist Mission Press, 1880)

——, *The Katha Sarit Sagara, or Ocean of the Streams of Story* (trans. C. H. Tawney, ed. N. M. Penzer) (London: C. J. Sawyer, 1924–8)

——, *Tales from the Kathasaritsagara* (trans. Arshia Sattar) (London: Penguin Classics, 1994)

Speyer, J. S., *Studies about the Kathasaritsagara* (Amsterdam: Johannes Müller, 1908)

Spink, Reginald, *Hans Christian Andersen and His World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1972)

Stableford, Brian, *Tales of Enchantment and Disenchantment* (Encino, CA: Black Coat Press, 2019)

Tatar, Maria, *The Hard Facts of the Brothers Grimm* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987)

Tolstoy, Leo, *Anna Karenina* (Ware, Herts: Wordsworth Classics, 1995)

Ulam, Adam B., *Prophets and Conspirators in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1998)

Venturi, Franco, *Roots of Revolution: A History of the Populist and Socialist Movements in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York: Grosset & Dunlop, 1966)

Verhoeven, Claudia, *The Odd Man Karakozov*: *Imperial Russia, Modernity, and the Birth of Terrorism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009)

——, 'Time of Terror, Terror of Time: On the Impatience of Russian Revolutionary Terrorism (Early 1860s–Early 1880s)', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, new series, 58, no. 2 (2010), pp. 254–73

Vilenskaia, E., *Khudiakov* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia 1969)

Villeneuve, Gabrielle-Suzanne de, *La Jardinière de Vincennes* (Liege: J. F. Bassompierre, père & fils, 1771)

——, *La Jeune Américaine et les contes marins* (ed. Elisa Biancardi) (Paris: Champion, 2008)

——, *Beauty and the Beast* (trans. Brian Stableford) (Encino, CA: Black Coat Press, 2017)

——, *The Naiads* (trans. Brian Stableford) (Encino, CA: Black Coat Press, 2017)

Villiers, Abbé Pierre de, *Entretiens sur les contes de fées et sur quelques autres ouvrages du temps* (1699)

Vincent, Thierry, 'La Belle et la Bête d'Après Mesdames de Villeneuve et Leprince de Beaumont', unpublished play script, 2020

Warner, Marina, *From the Beast to the Blonde* (London: Vintage Digital, 2015)

Whitfield, Clovis, and Martineau, Jane (eds), *Painting in Naples, 1606–1705*: *From Caravaggio to Giordano* (London: Royal Academy of Arts in association with Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1982)

Witchard, Anne Veronica, *Thomas Burke's Dark Chinoiserie: Limehouse Nights and the Queer Spell of Chinatown* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017)

Wullschlager, Jackie, *Hans Christian Andersen: The Life of a Storyteller* (London: Allen Lane, 2000)

Zechmeister, Alexander, *Einer Muss Heiraten* (Toronto: Copp, Clark, 1895)

Zipes, Jack, *Happily Ever After* (New York: Routledge, 1997)

——, *The Golden Age of Folk and Fairy Tales: From the Brothers Grimm to Andrew Lang* (Indianapolis/Cambridge, MA: Hackett, 2013)

Notes

Prologue

FN1 A pair of scientists from Durham and Lisbon universities published this research in 2016 in the journal *Royal Society Open Science*.
FN2 In the case of ‘Hansel and Gretel’, it’s coded as 327A. That’s according to the Aarne–Thompson–Uther Index, initiated by a Finnish folklorist in 1910, developed by an American scholar over the subsequent decades and expanded by a German folklorist in 2004, which defines stories according to tale types, so that, for example, ‘Cinderella’ is 510A and ‘Beauty and the Beast’ is 425C.
FN3 These include previously untranslated Russian tales, along with excerpts from their collector’s memoir; fairy tales by the author of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, still unavailable in English; the earliest known recitations of several tales from *The Thousand and One Nights*; as well as letters and other writings in German, Neapolitan and French. Sources and Further Reading at the end of this book provide more details about the translation of these sources.

Chapter 1

FN1 Spoken in Naples and its environs, Neapolitan is considered a language all of its own, and has striking differences from the Tuscan dialect that developed into modern Italian (as readers of Elena Ferrante’s *Neapolitan Quartet* will recognise). ‘We know this language, it’s Neapolitan, not Italian,’ said the Neapolitan actor Salvatore d’Onofrio, who I met when he was performing an adaptation of one of Giambattista’s tales. ‘We still use phrases and proverbs from Basile, so it feels very familiar to us.’ This pride in language is indivisible, Salvatore insists, from the storytelling: ‘His stories are our tradition. These are the stories told by our grandparents, handed down from generation to generation.’
FN2 Although usually credited to Galileo or the Dutchman Hans Lipperhey, the practical use of the telescope was arguably pioneered by the Neapolitan Francesco Fontana, who was the first to observe the sky using a telescope with two convex lenses, which he manufactured himself, in the 1620s.

Chapter 3

FN1 This is why the book is also known as *Pentamerone*, ‘five days’, with each day containing ten fairy tales, echoing Italian literature’s most famous story collection, the *Decameron* – or ‘ten days’ – of Giovanni Boccaccio.

FN2 Perrault's 'Donkey-Skin' and 'Sleeping Beauty', in particular, correspond closely with Giambattista's versions, as pointed out by Christopher Betts in *Charles Perrault: The Complete Fairy Tales* (2009). In recent years the passage of Giambattista's tales has been explored by Suzanne Magnanini in *Postulated Routes from Naples to Paris*; and the influence of his tales on Perrault and other French storytellers like Madame L'Héritier has been argued by Carmela Bernadetta Scala in *Fairy Tales – A World between the Imaginary* (pages 135–7).
FN3 The use of these clogs has embedded itself in the Italian language, in which *zoccola*, the word for 'whore', derives from *zoccolo*, 'wooden clog'.

Chapter 4

FN1 Although known in English as the *Arabian Nights*, their Arabic title is *Alf layla wa layla*, *The Thousand and One Nights*, and it was under this title that Galland's translation appeared, so we're sticking with it throughout this section.
FN2 It was in 1993 that Jérôme Lentin stumbled across the manuscript while researching his thesis. 'I was researching manuscripts of the Near East written in dialect,' he told me. 'Staying in Rome, I took the opportunity to look through the Arabic manuscripts of that city. So I spotted, among the manuscripts of the Vatican, that of Hanna Dyab.' It belonged to the collection of a Syrian Catholic priest called Paul Sbath, part of which was sold to the Vatican in 1928. It remained unedited and unpublished until 2015.
FN3 Indeed, *Robinson Crusoe* has striking similarities to a story that Hanna may have known: *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, a medieval Arabic tale about a man living on a desert island who befriends a native islander. Translated into English by the seventeenth-century orientalist Edward Pococke and his son, after finding a copy in Aleppo, it was cited by Daniel Defoe's contemporaries, such as Alexander Pope, in reference to the marooned sailor, Alexander Selkirk, on whom Crusoe was allegedly based.
FN4 Dating from the fifteenth century, it remains the oldest copy of the *Nights* in existence, excluding a single fragmentary page from the ninth century.
FN5 Toilets feature in Hanna's most famous tale – when the genie dumps Aladdin's love rival, the vizier's son, in a toilet. The absence of toilets in Marseilles was due to the proximity of the sea (so Hanna was told), but French toilets were still so rare that the Duchess of Orléans in Versailles could complain it was 'impossible to leave one's apartment without seeing somebody pissing'. For chamber pot-using European readers, the presence of a toilet in the humble home of a tailor was one of the tale's more surprising exotic details.
FN6 In his groundbreaking study, *Marvellous Thieves*, Paulo Lemos Horta identifies Aladdin's palace specifically with Versailles. Its louvred casement windows, in particular, suggest the French palace, and the detailed description of the stables could easily have been inspired by Versailles, where the royal stables left a considerable impression on Hanna. However, the chief feature of Aladdin's palace in the tale is a square domed room – a typical Middle Eastern design. This suggests that rather than evoking a single palace, Hanna was conjuring a composite. After all, Versailles wasn't the only impressive palace he visited. In Tunis, he and Lucas were entertained in the Bardo, of which he declared, 'I saw things that defy all description.' He recalled high pavilions 'with glass windows on every side', a 'marble staircase' and kiosks formed in a cross formation around a domed pool. Aladdin's palace is, of course, imaginary, but it makes sense that, in describing it, the storyteller was channelling the most impressive palaces he had recently visited, on both sides of the Mediterranean.

Chapter 5

FN1 He was writing in the wake of a fairy-telling phenomenon. Throughout the 1690s storytelling circles sprang up in French salons, narrating magical tales. The best-selling of them all was Charles Perrault, who shared a publisher with Galland and whose brother was one of the architects working at Versailles. We will delve amongst some of these tellers in Part Three.
FN2 This crucial identification was suggested by the editors of *D'Alep à Paris*, along with numerous other insights that help to illuminate Hanna's world.

Chapter 7

FN1 Adapted from 'The Pig King', an Italian tale in Giovanni Straparola's *Facetious Nights* (1550–5).
FN2 The official title was *Histories, or Tales of Past Times*, but it became better known by the subtitle.

Chapter 8

FN1 Rue de Maçon had such a low reputation it was listed in 1883 as one of ten Parisian streets designated for prostitution in medieval times that still 'carried the most shameful and dirtiest names'.
FN2 In this tale, published in 1745, Princess Adorée, confined in the 'Baleful Castle', writes several philosophical tracts, 'under the title "Of the Knowledge and of the Usage of True Liberty", where she demonstrated that life is slavery, that the only freedom is solitude'.
FN3 This long-running debate was dredged up in the run up to Disney's 2017 remake: 'It's not love, is it?' asked Zoe Williams in the *Guardian*. 'It's Stockholm syndrome.' But Emma Watson – cast as Belle – was eager to counter this position: 'She has none of the characteristics of Stockholm syndrome,' she told *Entertainment Weekly*, 'because she keeps her independence, she keeps that freedom of thought.'

Chapter 9

FN1 The book's legal status raises an intriguing question. Why did Crébillon not issue her stories a licence, as he did for some of her other works (such as *The Gardener of Vincennes*)? The answer is probably mired in the musty politics of the Parisian literary world. Given how often he refused licences to renowned authors such as Voltaire, liberally stamping approval on his mistress's works would have provoked costly slurs from his enemies.
FN2 Cocteau's 1946 film is remarkable not only for its artistry – the human candle holders, the rolling eyes of the statues following Belle across the courtyard, the Beast in his star-shaped frill and velvet shoulder pads, with his endearingly twitchy ears – but also for the circumstances in which it was made. 'Five years of shame and slime,' wrote Cocteau in his diary in late 1945 (for

he started filming only a few months after the end of the Second World War). ‘And in spite of the difficulties we must catch up. Whatever the cost, France must rise again.’ It was also a great personal achievement. Cocteau was wracked by lymphangitis, bronchitis and impetigo, disfigured by eczema to such an extent that he wore a veil made of black paper fastened to the brim of his hat with clothes pins. The set photographs evoke more *The Phantom of the Opera* than ‘the Beast’, but the overlap with his subject matter didn’t escape the auteur: ‘A ferocious beast [the Beast] has got its paw in the nape of my neck and is torturing me,’ he wrote on 17 October 1945: ‘A furious battle which I view against the background of the night.’

FN3 She is ignored, for example, in *The Meanings of Beauty and the Beast* (2004), in favour of Madame de Beaumont’s ‘definitive’ version; and in *The Hard Facts of the Brothers Grimm* (1987) she is dismissed as having ‘puffed up the story’, as if it was an overblown adaptation of Madame de Beaumont’s. In her seminal book *From the Beast to the Blonde* (1994), Marina Warner credits Gabrielle-Suzanne’s version as the ‘founding text of one of the most popular fairy tales of the modern world’, but also argues that ‘it has defeated almost all readers’.

Chapter 10

FN1 For this matter, the most valuable source is the *Handexemplar* (hand copy), an early proof of the *Household and Children’s Tales* sent by the Grimms’ publisher before the first edition was released in 1812 and 1815. In the margins of the *Handexemplar*, the brothers jotted down crucial information about the collection process, including names of the tellers whose recitals they transcribed. Where the stories originally came from, however, is another matter: Dortchen’s were heard from the older women in her life, including her mother and nurse, as well as the books she read; many of them, as we’ll see, corresponded with stories told by the French and Italian storytellers we have visited already on our trail.

FN2 ‘The whole instruction of the Royal Cabinet secretary,’ recalled Jacob, ‘consisted in the words: “you must put in big characters on the door: ‘Special Library of the King’”.’ Still, he didn’t complain about the salary, 2,000 francs, rising to 3,000 after a few months, ‘presumably because they were satisfied with me’.

FN3 Having insisted ‘that you show nobody my letters is extremely dear to me’, Dortchen scribbled enigmatically to Lotte, in 1808, ‘I prefer that your brother Wilhelm gave me a hand in thought than if he gave me his hand in person’.

Chapter 11

FN1 In the 1970s the scholar Heinz Rölleke – who did more sleuth-work than any other scholar to uncover the sources of the Grimms’ tales – revealed an intriguing ‘secret’ hidden in the 1819 second edition of *Children’s and Household Tales*. Referring to a ‘wild beast’ in the woods (the princess in disguise) in ‘All-Kinds-of-Fur’, the original version had been modified to use the words *dort* and *wild* (‘there’ and ‘wild’). ‘The intention of this new formulation is so hidden,’ wrote Rölleke, ‘that only the addressee could have known it.’ Even as he was pursuing romantic possibilities elsewhere, according to Rölleke’s interpretation, Wilhelm was communicating with Dortchen through storytelling.

FN2 More than one of the Grimm experts I consulted suggested it was the likeliest explanation for the long delay in their marriage, and at Grimm World, in Kassel, a puppet version of the play

is featured as a permanent exhibit.

Chapter 12

FN1 For example, the Hassenpflugs' 'Brier-Rose' corresponds to Charles Perrault's 'Sleeping Beauty' and Giambattista Basile's 'Sun, Moon and Thalia'; and Dortchen's 'All-Kinds-of-Fur' evokes Giambattista's 'The She-Bear'.
FN2 'I didn't bring such nice furniture to this house so it could be shat on with the stink of someone else's asshole,' declares the stepmother in Giambattista's bombastic version. Abandoned in the wood, the children try to follow a trail of bran, but it's eaten by a donkey . . . at this point the tale lurches off in its own idiosyncratic direction. The sister is kidnapped by pirates and swallowed by a giant fish; her brother is adopted by a kindly prince and has the fish caught and cut open; once the children are reunited, the prince locates their father and has the wicked stepmother rolled down a mountain in a sealed barrel.

Chapter 13

FN1 These log-pile houses on stilts were common in the swampy villages. They are echoed in the image of Baba Yaga's hut on chicken legs.

Chapter 14

FN1 As Robert Chandler, editor of *Russian Magic Tales*, put it to me: 'the novel getting going in Russia coincided with the expansion of interest in folklore, so high culture and folk culture closely interpenetrated each other, a great deal more than in English novels of the time'. The scholar Roman Jakobson corroborates this view in his commentary on Aleksandr Afanas'ev's collected volume *Russian Fairy Tales*: 'the appearance of such vast and magnificent collections as the books of Afanas'ev (1855–1864), Khudyakov, and others, coincide with the flowering of Russian literary prose. The Russian folk tale played a great role in the creative development of the classic masters of Russian prose – Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Leskov, Ostrovsky . . .'
FN2 As the scholar of Russian *skazki,* Sibelan Forrester, puts it: 'Everything was censored . . . And ever since the Grimms, collectors and readers had been interpreting, and selling, folk-tales as a basis of national identity and culture. So the stakes were higher than they would have been for some other genres.'
FN3 The Third Section of His Imperial Majesty's Own Chancellery was tsarist Russia's secret police department.
FN4 Scholars of this period suggest the Organisation played a decisive role in Ivan's journey to the West. In *Young Russia,* Abbott Gleason argues that Ishutin initiated the trip and the effect of Ivan's report about the revolutionaries he met in Western Europe 'on Ishutin and his friends was electric'; in *Roots of Revolution,* Franco Venturi suggests it was Ishutin who gave Ivan the money for his journey.

FN5 She does matter, however, in other Slavic-speaking countries, where she is a popular character in numerous folk tales recorded in Poland, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Ukraine, Belarus and elsewhere.

Chapter 16

FN1 The scholar who brought the *Ocean* to Western attention was H. H. Wilson, who summarised the early part of the book in the *Oriental Quarterly Magazine* in 1824; and the German orientalist Hermann Brockhaus issued the first Western edition in 1839.
FN2 Somadeva's fellow Kashmiri poet, Kshemendra, wrote a version of these tales thirty years earlier, but it was a third the length of Somadeva's. Comparing both versions 'results in demonstrating the bad taste of Kshemendra', asserted the French scholar Félix Lacôte, in an influential treatise published in 1908: 'Somadeva gives him a lesson at the same time in art and in modesty'. Moreover, while both versions are derived from a common source, 'we must not impute to the old poet [i.e. Gunadhya] either the incoherence of the composition,' wrote Lacôte, 'or the paternity of the greater part of the material'. In plain speak, Somadeva wasn't as dependent on his source as he claimed.
FN3 The mountain district of Kangra, located between Delhi and Kashmir.
FN4 Chandalas were the much maligned offspring of mixed castes.

Chapter 17

FN1 For example, 'Cinderella' is a mourning tale about a girl who covers herself in ashes (cinders) to grieve for her lost mother; 'Hansel and Gretel' is a pilgrims' progress structured around an initiation test; and 'Beauty and the Beast' carries echoes of virgin sacrifice. If we delve into the tales, there are often religious and mythological resonances comparable with those that pave the surfaces of the Indian tales.

Chapter 18

FN1 The Persian version appears in *The Thousand and One Days*; after showing up in *The Thousand and One Nights*, the tale appeared in Italy in Straparola's *Facetious Nights* as well as the *Decameron*. It also left an imprint on Giambattista Basile's tale 'Rosella'. The tale made its way north through variations like the Middle Dutch play 'The Entrapped Suitors', and appeared in the Icelandic story 'Geirlaug and Groedari', among other versions.
FN2 Hence he mocks a foolish Brahmin who muddles the *Sama Veda* with the word for wheedling – *sama* – and praises a king who can respond to a poet's verses 'correctly in the Sanskrit language'; and from the tale of a fool who breaks a magic pot, he draws the conclusion that 'The minds of people who are slaves to drinking and other vices are destroyed and so they cannot retain wealth even after they have got it', a point he repeats on several occasions.

Chapter 19

FN1 ‘It all came about,’ explains Andersen scholar Anne Klara Bom, ‘because Andersen’s two hundredth anniversary was so badly mishandled. There were some really stupid decisions during the anniversary, like paying Tina Turner a million euros to come and sing “Simply the Best”. It was an economic scandal, the board had to resign and the mayor lost his job. So the local media coined this term – “Hans Christian Andersen Sickness” – and it’s caught on.’

Chapter 20

FN1 The stories in that first volume were ‘The Tinderbox’, ‘Little Claus and Big Claus’, ‘The Princess on [not ‘and’!] the Pea’ and ‘Little Ida’s Flowers’.

FN2 Later, he stayed at Dickens’s house in Ramsgate, although it wasn’t an entirely successful visit. The novelist’s son, Henry, recalled that Hans was ‘most decidedly disconcerting in his general manner . . . so much so that I am afraid the small boys of the family rather laughed at him behind his back’. After Hans had left, Dickens placed a sign in the room where he’d stayed: ‘Hans Christian Andersen slept in this room which seemed to the family AGES’.